The Flower That Blooms In Adversity

by LittleDesertFlower

Summary

She came to the north trying to find herself, but she found someone else.

Notes

I’m not really sure how to label this, because while it’s meant as a sort of homage to one of my favorite characters from FMAB, it’s also the closest thing I’ve written to an original work (I’ve made so much stuff up for this one ^^) that I’m sharing with others and therefore one hell of a challenge.
But if there’s one thing I love in this world is stories (and I have so much love for this one), so here we go!

This fic is for Hikari, because she’s been listening to my delighted writer noises for as long as I was watching FMAB earlier this month and then later on as I told her all my crazy ideas for this fic. Sharing fictional stories with you and getting to explore so many headcanons has given me so much life, I love you <3

See the end of the work for more notes.
Zinnia knew she would be happy here. Because it was nothing like the cities she knew, the lives she’d led before. If she looked up, the blue sky spread out towards the horizon like a mantle, welcoming her home in the place of the dull gray clouds at Central or the scorching sun in summer down south. It was a comforting shade of blue. It made the snowed-in summits of the mountain range in the distance all the more striking for spring, although she knew what she was getting into by travelling here. How couldn’t she? Nobody came north of North City unaware of the lurking cold, and those who did either perished or ran. Zinnia had heard a thing or two, so having snow a few miles north of where she’d be living didn’t seem too much of an inconsistency for the beautiful sun that was shining that day.

Back at North City, that city of compact low houses and buoyant activity, she’d arranged for a farmer to take her as far as the outskirts of what would be her new home. Riding backwards on the hay cart, she’d had to turn around to see the outline of the town, waiting behind the flora. Specks of boxy dwellings and a few trees dotting the landscape in green and amber, her first introduction to it was the road sign before crossing the bridge, where her kind driver had let her get off.

Iver, it read. She almost snorted out loud. Someone had erased the ‘r’ from ‘river’ and thus the town had been named, probably. Iver up ahead.

“There it is, think you can manage?” the man had told her once she was back on the ground. He was heading the other way, to his farm on the outskirts.

“Sure thing,” she’d said. There was no need to mention she knew this area almost by heart after some minor research, even if she’d never seen it in person before, so she simply thanked him and went on her way.

She didn’t have any heavy luggage, just a bag with some clothes, a notebook and a few pens in case her muse decided Zinnia was worth returning to. She could really fuck this up, big time, bigger than the other times. She was miles and miles away from anything she was directly familiar with, jobless for the moment and with no plan other than walk around till she saw some shop that needed new staff and politely offer to fill any vacancies.

But Zinnia walked across the bridge, trying not to think about it too much because, really, it wouldn’t fix anything at this point, and walked on.

There was even tall grass, she found, as she kept going through the dirt path. And flowers, of the most disconcerting colors at that. Orange, brown, violet, white; their scent got in Zinnia’s nose, and she sneezed it out after a while. It was such a disappointing thing to see in a land that was barren for almost three seasons out of four. But still...new, in a way. It smelled that way, like the excitement she’d kept bottled up since she’d decided to take a train north and not come back to the South Area for a long long time.

There was nothing for her down there, there never had been. Just the novelty of a place and cities big enough that she could never get to know everybody. And there probably wouldn’t be much for her up north either. She’d seen flowers in the south, and villages on her way in the train.

She was going to be happy here for a while, till she learned every street and every road and knew how to travel across the vastness of North Area with her eyes closed. And then she’d find herself locked at home, bored out of her mind, never actually doing anything with all she knew. Never finding what she was looking for and denied she lacked. And later on, when the boredom got to her,
she’d pack her bags and leave again, chasing a wind that never let her catch up.

Yet today was the first day, not the last. And even if that last day came to be, she wanted to walk to it confidently and happily. And she needed to get to know Iver first, and who she was while living there.

Zinnia took her time getting to the town, though, observing gently how nature unfurled underneath her shoes, around her tiny silhouette in such a mantle of plants and pasture. Like an intruder, she tried not to be noticed once she crossed into the literal town.

The main street was cobblestone and the few lamps in the main square, copper. And small. A few minutes later, after ambling around minor and narrow streets, she realized in dismay she’d already seen it all. Iver was barely a spot in a map, four or three streets, fifty or so dwellings, and open field all around it.

She made the best of efforts not to look up at the sky for solace, estranged and suddenly lonely in a place she was new to. Zinnia didn’t know much about the north, but she guessed that staying in the middle of nowhere looking grim was common ‘spot the odd one out’ behavior everywhere, and stuck to walking around again, trying to give off the impression that she was just another neighbor.

She kept an eye out of shops. There was a small shop that looked like a market compressed into one single room and that smelled too much like meat. She’d had enough of that for at least some more years, thank you very much. Of course, there was a tavern, but Zinnia took one look at the façade and the state of inhabitation there and span around in the opposite direction.

The sun was already pretty high up in the sky when she stopped in one of the minor streets, leaned on a wall by the shade, the weight of her luggage starting to make her arms ache (she really needed to work on that), and wiped the sweat off her forehead with her free hand.

“Hi there,” someone said, quickly approaching her.

Zinnia immediately wanted to make herself invisible. Where she was from, if someone called to you in a place like this, running was the most appropriate option. But she had to keep in mind that this was nothing like the places she knew.

“Oh, hi,” Zinnia said. “Hey.”

“I don’t know you, which means you’re new, correct?” The woman talking was short and plump and smiley, a few inches shorter than her.

“Correct.”

At Zinnia’s puzzled expression, the woman burst into laughter.

“Oh it’s a very small town,” she said, to appease her. “The last tenant we had moved away some time ago, and I spoke to Lynna the other day and she said she’d already rented it to someone else, which is rare around here to say the least.” The woman chuckled. “So, you’re the someone else.”

Zinnia blinked a couple of times. She had no idea what was going on, but she decided to go with it. Lynna sounded just like the name of her landlady, and apparently this woman knew her?

“Yes, I’m Zinnia,” she said, reaching a hand out for the woman to shake.

The woman grinned at her. “Candie,” she said, shaking Zinnia’s hand vigorously, then letting go. “What is a girl like you doing just walking around? Haven’t you been at the house yet?”
“No, I was actually—” Zinnia started. “I hope this isn’t awfully rude of me, but… do you know of any place around here that needs some help?”

Candie laughed again. Zinnia had no idea what to make of so much laughter.

“I dearly hope you didn’t get to Iver looking for work, honey, there’s not a lot to do around here unless you like cattle.”

“I … don’t.”

“I figured as much,” Candie said, smirking and looking at Zinnia as if categorizing her already as a city girl. “As it turns out, though, I have a little bookshop just around the corner.”

*Everything is just around the corner here, Zinnia thought.*

“I don’t exactly need help, and I certainly don’t pay much, but if you’re interested I’m there in the mornings.” The woman turned around to leave with a cute hand wave, then came back as if she’d remembered something important she needed to say. “Oh by the way, do you need any help finding your house?”

Zinnia smiled as sweetly as she could. She could probably be dropped alone three miles from here and find her house in record time without never having seen it before.

Her dad had used to ruffle her hair affectionately when he’d first realized his little girl wasn’t likely to ever get lost anywhere, having such an uncanny sense of direction as she did. It was as if she could smell her way, map it with all her senses and not get distracted by anything else.

“Our Zinnia could walk out of a blizzard unscathed and land right where she was supposed to arrive,” her dad had used to say to her mum as she chopped and prepared the meat for her customers.

“Thank you, but I’m covered,” Zinnia said now.

“Have a nice day, then!” Candie said, already walking away.

“You too…” Zinnia whispered under her breath. Then she kept moving.

Her house wasn’t too far, as it turned out, a small square thing in a corner of the town with brown tiles and graying yellowish walls that seemed too thick at first sight. She approached it slowly, her arms definitely tired of hurling the bag, and left it on the ground willy-nilly, then knocked at the door.

A blonde lady with tired eyes greeted her—Lynna, Zinnia supposed—and gave her a quick tour and her keys. Then she left Zinnia alone.

Zinnia sat in the small living room, all dark brown furniture that frankly both looked and smelled *old*, and exhaled loudly.

“I’m going to be happy here,” she lied to herself.
“You get morning shifts, okay? Sometimes I might open in the afternoon, for the… you know, summer crowd.” Candie was telling her, leaning on one of the dusty shelves.

It was a big joke around here, the ‘summer crowd’. Iver hadn’t gained a new visitor in years. Every year there was some elderly person who died of old age and if the town got lucky, a baby was born at some point in the next decade or so to replace them. Zinnia had been a wonderful exception to the demographic stagnation. Lynna, her landlord, had told her (very non-briefly) during the house tour about how after her grandfather had died she’d kinda wanted to just do something with the place instead of sitting around and mulling over all that emptiness. Instead, now Zinnia got to sit around and mull in herstead, thinking ‘oh wait somebody actually died in this house’ every time something creaked.

Maybe it wasn’t that farfetched, though, to be fearful of the unknown. There was a lot Zinnia had tapped but never actually delved into. And now that she was going to sit in a bookshop for hours—small as it was—she’d find free time to read on more unexplored topics.

Countries she’d never visit, peoples across the world with customs that enchanted her as much as they surprised her. Well, at least here up north she was getting to know one people better. The northerners. And their summer jokes.

“Got it. Summer crowd in summer,” Zinnia said, nodding and laughing. “So, how many people actually come here in the summer?”

Summer, also, meant just good weather conditions. It was probably summer to the people at Iver right now, although June was still pretty far away.

“Briggs soldiers, mostly,” Candie said. “But they just come to town for the food, mind you. And they stick it out to the fall, too. Oh, and sometimes people from North City. They’re not that bad, for… you know, southerners.”

Everything below Iver on a map was, inarguably, south—no matter how far north it was in comparison to everything else. There was a farmer living a mile away from town, and his nickname was Southy.

“Got it.”

“It’s an easy job, Zinnia, dear. Don’t worry about it,” Candie said, laughing softly, and reading the other woman’s discomfort rather easily. “Just look for any book they might want, write it down if it’s not here—which might happen from time to time, depending on who asks—and I’ll consider getting someone from North City to order it for me. But that takes some time, and only applies in the summer, of course.”

“Of course.” Zinnia repeated, her mind already drifting off to other things. Maybe roads were cut off in the winter and that’s why they couldn’t order new books? Could it be that bad? It couldn’t be that bad. Maybe Candie was just… too lazy to place the orders. Who even wanted complicated consultation books here anyway?

“So that’s about it for today. Now go have some fun, you’re young.”
“I’m not that…” Candie dismissed her with a hand wave, and Zinnia cut her sentence short. *Young...*

She just looked it. It was the soft skin, the short hair, and the endless parade of emotion-ridden faces. It made her look fresh into her twenties. But she was far from those days. She was an *adult*, in theory as well as in practice. Feeling like it was another story. She had too many holes in this… strange experience of a life to call herself a complete adult with her future all spread out neatly for her to dive into. Hell, she hadn’t even decided what she wanted to do with it.

Write stories for other people to sell, like she would do here? Tour the world incessantly from one silly job to another, meeting people whose names blurred in her head when trying to remember them, come back home years later to run the family butchery?

“This will one day be yours, Zinnia, like it or not,” her mother had said some time back, before Zinnia was thinking of escaping life in the little provincial town they lived in, near Central. Zinnia had liked the shiny knives that cut through meat as if it were water, and dealing with the clients and their gossip, and living close to her friends, but that had never been for her.

*Maybe it’ll have to be at some point*, she thought now. *Mum was right, I’ll be the rightful owner after them.* But she’d never be a butcher. That family inheritance would die when her parents did.

Zinnia grabbed a chair from one of the small and half-empty restaurants in the main street, said hi to the owner, and sat down in the sun. For a few minutes, she just paid attention to everything that caught her eye. Iver’s pseudo-butcher’s yells were audible even a few streets away, and the neighbor next door was brewing coffee: the smell of it reached her as well, sweet and strong. Some other neighbors crossed the main street, saying hi to her like she’d been living there for months instead of days. Like she finally belonged somewhere, in spite of her thin clothes and a quieter sense of humor than they were used to around here.

*Small towns*, she thought, smiling. And then she leaned over to grab her notebook from her bag.

This was easy, observing. Information flying around for her to capture and twist until all that came out was a nice liquid juice of words she’d never solidify. Putting them on paper, on the contrary… That would prove to be a worthy challenge.

 Quickly, she scribbled something on a piece of paper, ripped it from her notebook and put it on top of her big straw hat on the cobblestone so it was visible for the public.

**WRITTEN PORTRAITS FOR 200 CENTZ**

Then she crossed her legs, content with the idea, and started writing her first portrait of the day. The breeze flowing around her seemed to take her far away, to that place in her mind where writing was made a little bit easier.

*And if I had to name for this place, I wouldn’t call it ‘Iver’, of all things. There’s little about this town that reminds me of water, of a river without an ‘r’. It’s more like blood, flowing in the same direction, evenly. Like clockwork. Every hour, my next-door asks her next-door how things are going until a conversation starts, except at night. And every night, I look up at the sky to find that the stars are in a different spot than the night before, just like sometimes people stray from their path for a little while, then resume it as if nothing had happened. As if nothing was bleeding. But, to be honest, ‘blood’ is a pretty sanguinary thing to name a town. Perhaps I should remove the ‘b’, but then the double ‘o’ would sound different, wouldn’t it?, and where’s the fun in that?*

A few minutes later, one of the residents came up to her and asked for a portrait. Zinnia told her neighbor to wait around for a few minutes and that she’d have it in no time. She wasn’t really much
of a tenacious writer, words were chopped out of her like slices of bark from a tree trunk, but it was a start.

It helped that she’d only met these people a few days ago. Their faces were fresh in her mind, and she could recall the first impression she’d had of them and compare it to now, when they behaved around her the same way they did among themselves.

After this one woman, some more people came over, smiling, pleasantly surprised at the novelty, and loud. Wonderfully loud, taking space like they were proud of being in it, like they were certain they had a right to be right there right then and make it theirs openly for the world to see.

And when Zinnia looked up, laughing with them, legs crossed in the spring sun, that’s when she saw her.

Olivier Armstrong.

Perhaps it should’ve made Zinnia question things already, how she recalled the name so easily without having never seen her before. The Amestrian military had few women among their forces, fewer even in the highest ranks. She was the only one, ever, to make it to general. It was common knowledge, the tales of the woman up north who kept Drachma away with her unwavering discipline. There were other rumors, less carefully worded, which Zinnia had paid no mind to. She’d grown up in a town close to the heart of the military at Central, and there were always news of scandals and coups d’état, disorganization and treason. Leave them to rule, but don’t question them much or they might burn your city to the ground like they’d done with Ishval, claiming civil war. That way, none of the casualties were officially their fault.

A bunch of bullshit. Although, Zinnia thought, it had to take balls to be one among many, even in such a questionable institution. A woman in a world of men, and angry resentful men with a thirst for supremacy, to make matters worse. She must be a force to be reckoned with, Zinnia thought to herself, and kept watching her move across Iver’s main street. She was alone, tugging at the reins of a brown-coated horse, and walked past every establishment like she owned it and already knew what waited for her inside. Maybe she did own them, the Armstrongs were pretty rich. The hooves of her horse clacked softly against the pavement when they moved from shop to shop, not really stopping anywhere.

“Hey, Zinnia, you with us?” some of her neighbors were saying to her, kind of worried that she wasn’t responding. That’s when she realized she’d been far away from the present moment. Truly far away.

“Oh shit, sorry, yeah. Just gimme a few minutes, it’ll be done soon.”

They left, and Zinnia looked at her piece of paper, intently, almost begging the portrait to come forth at once. She had to make the words pop up or she’d disappoint her new neighbors. She, also, forced herself to look at the notebook. If she looked up, she’d get distracted with something else, something shiny that stood up in this sea of routine. Something that, for some reason, had made her completely lose her train of thought.

The first time that I— She wrote it down, then scratched it off. Maybe using the first person hadn’t exactly been a bright idea, it felt like she was five and at school writing an assignment on something that wouldn’t stick later, something without a soul. Did her writings truly ever have a soul?

Coming here, it's hard not to be swept away by the p— No, that wouldn’t work either. None of this would work. Her heart wasn’t on it, suddenly.
What do you want, heart? Do you want company and sun? Well, it’s all around you. Just write about it, then I’ll get you home to the shade and some book or something, she thought to herself. Words were supposed to be her thing, what she’d chosen to do, even if it wasn’t a job. But she felt like she wasn’t words’ thing.

She sighed, almost groaning in dissatisfaction; she wasn’t going to write this commissioned portrait she couldn’t get out of her, was she? And she almost tortured herself for it.

Almost.

The words—the wrong words—flew, just like water. Moved inside her onto the notebook like clouds in the sky, flawlessly. Always in the right direction, always true. And she almost tortured herself for it.

Almost.

Her neighbors were gonna come back any second now, asking for progress, asking to see themselves reflected in her words, and she had close to nothing, she barely had anything. And what she had, she couldn’t give to them.

“Selling on the street is not permitted,” said an authoritative voice, breaking the next sentence in Zinnia’s head before she’d even finished it, and making her startle on her chair. Zinnia immediately looked up, trying to find the source of such power, but the sun was in her way. She shifted a little to the left to avoid its radiance.

Long blonde hair and blue—the bluest blue there was—met her eyes. Zinnia blinked a few times, blinded by the light.

“Sorry. What?”

“You can’t sell anything here.”

“Oh, I’m not selling…” Zinnia went on to explain, blushing redder than she was supposed to for something as silly as this. She was about to grab the slapdash sign she’d made. “I write portraits, I—”

“That’s not a job,” Olivier said harshly. Zinnia immediately sat straight, letting go of her sign. “Get off my streets.”

She barely glanced at Zinnia for a second before her horse neighed and she started walking on like there had never been anything to see here.

“Your streets?” Zinnia said out loud. Perhaps too loudly. Perhaps too soon.

“The streets,” Olivier immediately corrected herself without an ounce of hesitation. “Get off the streets.” She sounded just as disinterested and just the slightest bit annoyed by the encounter, but Zinnia couldn’t get her eyes off of her and there definitely was something else there.

She’d been watching Olivier for a few minutes too long earlier not to be able to tell now.

Olivier had … actually, really… been looking back at her before she’d walked away?

A whole whirlpool with bullet noise as background music, that’s what Olivier was feeling as it crawled out of her onto the reality of this sun-lit square. Ianthe’s face, Ianthe’s hand on her face drifting away from eternity.
“Leave. Before I change my mind and chase after you and never go”, Olivier had said. And Ianthe’s green eyes were sad and wise beyond their years, as she had turned back for a moment to say:

“Just remember, when you’re looking for something to place the blame on, that it was your ambition that did this.”

The worst part was that it hadn’t been ambition what had kept Olivier from dropping her sword in the train station in Central and running after her that day. She would have given up everything for that to be the case. But the truth was that what had kept her ankles dug on the cold concrete ground wasn’t ambition or thirst for more power or even loyalty to the organization that had become her family. It was the wish to protect that one person she would probably die in battle for. The wish to keep her safe from this—from the destruction and the chaos and the impossible life of a woman in the military. A life for a life, Olivier had thought, watching Ianthe leave forever. One single tear had streamed down her face, already crystalized in one ephemeral snowflake before it hit the ground and melted.

Now, years later, it was Olivier that was walking away rather than pushing someone to. She’d come down to Iver for some distraction from the men shouting profanity at Briggs about provisions, and she was suddenly and without a single warning getting caught up in something a lot more energy-consuming than that. A war she hadn’t thought for too many years that she had chances of losing.

“Hey, wait,” Zinnia called to her. Olivier turned around once more, cold as ice. “Keep this, as a token of good faith. Or proof,” she said, ripping the page she’d been writing on from notebook and offering it to Olivier. “Whatever you’ll take it as. But take it.” Zinnia’s eyes were honest in their offer, if perhaps a bit... tentative. “Please.”

Her heart echoed loud in her ears, reminding her that doing this, and doing this now, was stupid. And that she was probably going to regret it. She didn’t even like this woman, or what she represented, or the place she occupied in the world. She didn’t even know her. But, well, Zinnia didn’t really know any of her neighbors either, did she? And she’d written them kind words anyway.

Olivier took the folded piece of paper in her hands, slowly, almost distrusting it. And she kept it folded, in fear, perhaps, that if she opened it it would explode in her face like a grenade. For a second, Zinnia was almost certain she was going to rip it to shreds in front of her. But, after what seemed like a few minutes, she didn’t.

Without a word, Olivier walked on, dragging her horse behind, and she didn’t look back now. Some wars, she’d never win.

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Tall, well-built, standing over the world in her permanent strong stance,

it's not very hard to imagine why she's been called The Impregnable Wall of Briggs for so long.

Olivier Armstrong would protect the entire world on her own

from the dangers lurking outside of her city, and she would succeed.

Chapter End Notes
Finally, the Ice Queen has made her entrance ^^
“Hey, boss, you brought any good stuff?” said the new guy as soon as Olivier and the other men who’d rode down to Iver that day entered the common room. Everybody immediately fell silent in their own conversations and looked down at their cups of muddy coffee, but whether out of respect for privacy or out of intimidation it was hard to tell; their faces were still like tree bark in a windstorm.

Olivier had just gone in, practically facing the reality of being back like a bull charging forward—head fucking on. She needed to ease back into the mentality she’d developed to match this place’s. *Survival of the fittest means that as long as you’re temporarily not fit, your chances of surviving decrease. Do you want to give up on survival, General Armstrong?* she told herself. *Then you know what to do.*

She had to embrace her title of The Northern Wall of Briggs again. There were many names that had come with that one, and she welcomed them all in. She *was* a bitch among bastards, she *was* cold as the ice she’d been made queen of. She embraced it all, felt it cool her down. Now she’d see the world the way she meant to: no grays, just black and white. Just truth and lies. Fact and manipulation.

It’d all been briefly stripped away from her by recent circumstances that were, unluckily, outside of her control. But she’d regain her vision now. Completely.

Standing tall by the coffee machine, she finished pouring herself some coffee, then turned around slowly.

“Austin!” she called. “Tell the people at the kitchen you’ll take over all the dish-washing tonight. Till first light. And I’ll see you during morning watch.”

The man paled, tried to look for support from his colleagues but they were all silent as tombs, conveying perfectly the message Austin should’ve learned on his first night: *do not confront the General unless it’s life-or-death.*

“B-boss?” the soldier was probably gulping in discomfort right now at the thought of spending an entire night washing hundreds of plates and cutlery and then rejoining the other men keeping watch like he’d actually gotten some sleep. How many people lived at the fort? Enough to get him through the night working at top speed, that was for sure. He *wasn’t* getting any sleep, was this even legal?

“That’s general to you,” Olivier barked. “Catch up to the rules or I’ll deport you back to Central, are we clear?” She wasn’t going to, the paperwork it entailed was too elaborate and she didn’t have any need for it. But it was a threat that worked because it was a display of power, and the newbies feared that more than they feared the winter cold.

Then she grabbed her cup of coffee and finished crossing the room without even waiting for an answer. Her head hurt, and the last thing she needed was dealing with the soldiers that had come right out of the bleaker sides of the country, always used to warmth and good food and the nurture of their commanding officers.

Olivier almost smiled to herself as she slammed the door behind her. He’d have none of that here, the
sooner he got used to it the better.

Zinnia sat down in front of what looked like the oldest telephone in existence; she doubted it would even work. For a few days now, she’d definitely been avoiding this. She should’ve just done the thing when she’d first gotten settled there but she hadn’t, for some reason. Probably fear of Anthony slamming a ‘I told you so, I told you that wouldn’t be your home either’ down on her.

He didn’t, though. He picked up like he’d seen Zinnia the day before, and caught her up with the town gossip before he dared to ask softly:

“So, how’s the north treating you?”

“It’s… chilly for spring, but not unpleasantly. And there’s… flowers.” She shuddered at the thought. “I didn’t think there’d be any, it’s the north.” Zinnia paused to think about something of interest she could add to that. So far it’d been a lame thing to say. “And like, everybody’s already used to me. It feels like I’ve been here forever.”

Her tone made it clear that wasn’t a positive thing.

“So, you think you’re gonna stay there? Forever, I mean.”

He sounded genuine. Zinnia wanted to thank him for that. Distant but genuine was something she could appreciate.

“I don’t know.” Should I?, she thought. “Is that like super important and I’m only now hearing about it as an important concept?”

“At least the last place was closer to home, Zin,” Anthony mumbled.

She wished he’d just said ‘I miss you’ like a normal person, like her parents normally did, instead of baiting her to get back, to stop pursuing something she didn’t even think was real anymore. But he’d done the same thing for the five years she’d been away, going from place to place. Anthony just wasn’t going to change. Neither was she, for that matter. They’d just have to work around that, decide if those were stable enough foundations for their friendship.

“Hey you’re welcome to just get on a train and come see me,” she said. “There’s plenty of room in this house.”

“Yeah, why not?” he said in a tone that clearly implied the opposite.

“But come now that’s warm-ish. Winters are rumored to be something else.”

Anthony snorted. The conversation was that dead. She wanted to cry at the realization. He was the only person she felt she could talk to about things, even if he was kind of blasé about everything and required occasional showers of reality. But he mostly understood, and listened. And knew to come to her when he needed something too.

Where had all of that gone?

“Northerners, am I right?” he teased.

“Yeah, definitely...”
Zinnia was about to tell him about what had happened to her that day on the square, but she bit her lip right in time. She had mixed feeling about that encounter, it’d been so awkwardly ill-timed, such bad luck too... She wasn’t really sure she wanted to bring it up with Anthony, of all people. He was a sweetheart most of the time, but there were memories they both shared that some comments she might make today wouldn’t really help with.

“I’m glad you’re doing okay,” Anthony said honestly.

“Yeah,” she said, trying to smile although he wouldn’t see. Reflex, she supposed, from those times when she had forced herself to in front of him just to make him happy. “Thanks for picking up.”

“Hey, I always pick up.”

“You know what I meaaannn,” Zinnia said. “Thank you.”

He laughed, then sighed.

“Nighty night, don’t freeze over.”

“Fuck you,” she said affectionately, and hung up the phone.

The empty room echoed that last sigh of hers, and she just asked herself out loud: “So... now what?”

It wasn’t that late, really, but here the sun set earlier than down south. She’d miss the light, though. She took off her clothes, brushed her teeth, and set to bed, grabbing one of the few books she’d brought all the way with her, and eventually ditching it for her own notebook.

Zinnia usually would never reread something she’d written, especially if it was short and pointless, which it was more often than not. Tonight, though, draped in rough-at-touch sheets that smelled like closed spaces and ice, she wished she’d written more. The words were sloppy, too charged with emotions she wasn’t even sure were really hers. But they made for good poetic prose, for a detailed yet sentimentally vague portrait of someone she’d probably never see again. But there’d been something about her... intriguing, in a way.

A woman of the military, in charge of an entire fortress and god knew what else, walking alone through the smallest town in existence, and stopping to tell her off. And for something so stupid, too. If she hadn’t been so intent in her telling her off, Zinnia would’ve thought Olivier had just chosen the first excuse that came to mind to publicly embarrass her.

Zinnia hid her face in the covers, pulling at the sheets so they’d cover her up to the nose. She had felt so stupid, out of place. Which was weird, since everybody here made sure she was always included as one of them, as part of the cycle of life. She’d felt like the different child again, the weird one that liked uncommon things and spoke too much of things nobody cared about.

Zinnia should’ve fucking told Anthony about this. Maybe it would’ve hurt his long-gone feelings, but he would have probably had something intelligent that made sense to say to her, if not something honest and reassuring.

She was going to need a bucketful of that if she planned to survive here without losing her mind. And she was fucked, Anthony lived too far away and knew nothing about anything up here. She’d have to make new friends who understood the way of life in the north and could tell her more about the people she would have to deal with.

But it definitely was not the thought of new friends that she fell asleep to that night. The last thing she’d remember the next morning was being enraptured by the warmest, purest shade of blue, around
There was a knock on the door. Miles came in a few seconds later without waiting for her to say he could or growl at him to get out. It almost made her snort out loud that he knew with all certainty she’d still be in there in spite of the late hour. The small round windows at Fort Briggs had stopped letting in enough light to work in a few hours ago.

“Nothing new on the Mountain Men?” Miles asked. It was too late for him to still be up and working, too. Everybody else was fast asleep in their bunks, except for those on watch and Austin (who Olivier hoped had followed orders and was washing dishes), and the fort was quiet as the sea in a windless evening. Not even the pipes made a noise.

“No, their messenger reported back earlier. Everything’s quiet out there,” Olivier said without looking up from the paperwork that she might as well be married to by now after fifteen years. It piled up even if she worked twice as fast through it. Then, after a few seconds of silence that meant Miles hadn’t left yet, she looked up: “Go to bed, Miles. I’ll need you fresh in the morning.”

“I have a bad feeling about this, sir.”

“We all do. It’s Drachma. But they’ll still be there for you to worry about tomorrow.” It was a useful lesson to learn. “Get some sleep, soldier. That’s an order.

“You too, sir,” he said, and left without another word.

Fifteen years, and everything still orbited around the same fucking thing. It made time pass slower, thicker. The same conflict, over and over, manifesting in new ways. Day after day, Olivier woke up having to remind herself that this was how it’d always be. Keeping an invasion from happening while looking for a way to preemptively invade first. More territory, more control, more of everything. Briggs was the ‘m’ to that ‘more’, and she was the one to decide how the strings would be pulled in order to get there. If they ever did. For now, it was enough of a success that they managed to keep Drachma at bay.

Her men were ready. If there truly were Drachman men trying to cross the mountains, her subordinates would find them. And all there’d be left to do, after hearing them out, was decide whether it made more sense to kill them to send a message or send them back and kill all hope of ever getting the upper hand.

Olivier knew which one she’d choose.

As long as the north was safe, did any of that really matter? It was just mere details, she didn’t even know if any of the people at her fort wanted the upper hand. All of this, all of this elaborateness around her, was simply there as an addition, a way to solidify that Briggs stood and continued to stand. Years ago, she’d read about the history behind this fort, about how the first men to be sent north were few and far between, living in the foundations of the wall that would later be built when Drachma grew violent and war dawned on them as a reality rather than a distant omen. This had started as something so simple… She had to remind herself of that, of what really mattered, if she wanted to continue doing her best job. The job nobody wanted…

Because it was always cold up north (lies), because it was more of a diplomatic dance than a real conflict (lies as well, she was the one who made a negotiation of sorts of this rather than carnage, and occasionally it still circled back to direct confrontation), because the food was terrible and the water
tasted like salt (not lies), because being at the top of a wall required vision and temperance like nothing else (also not lies) and a rare number of people on this country had what it took to commandeer so many soldiers as one, to keep them all safe. Fort Briggs had not had a casualty for as long as she’d been their general.

And Olivier would be lying if she said this wasn’t what she wanted. It was just that today had reminded her of what she’d used to want alongside with this, in the past, and what she’d inevitably ended up giving up on. All in the name of duty. But perhaps there’d been no duty, perhaps she’d just been scared.

Fifteen years. She hadn’t had words like these addressed to herself for fifteen years. And now, after so long, after willingly sacrificing so much, including her personal life, those words had made it back into her life when she’d least expected them to.

Olivier Armstrong would protect the world on her own from the dangers lurking outside of her city...

She shook her head, elbows on her desk, and rubbed at her temples. Fifteen years of dutifully protecting the north, of never-ending shifts. And now all of a sudden everything she’d worked for felt empty and bleak, worth for nothing except sleeplessness and headaches. All for some stupid words anybody could’ve written?

I should be the one washing dishes until morning, Olivier thought to herself in defeat. This was as absurd as a private calling her ‘boss’, after all.

There were never any letters. Olivier had waited for them, even if she knew they’d never come. She’d had the last word, and had chosen to make it silent. There’d be no follow-up to this, nothing that’d allow her to move on.

The men around her breathed too loud, took too much space, snored at night like the room wasn’t filled with fifty other people. Stomped on their way to the communal bathrooms, told rude jokes to each other when she walked past them, especially those above her. Especially at first. Pigs, she’d used to think.

She missed being on the other side of that, being loud and young in a small room in her parents’ huge house with someone worth making noise with. She missed sharing a bathtub and sneaking Ianthe into her small bed at headquarters when she was asked to spend the weekend there, training at day. She missed looking into those small angry eyes and knowing Ianthe and hers matched, for some reason—whatever it was, however twisted. She missed whispering incredibly obscene things to her ear when people were around because it always made Ianthe angrier and smaller and yet... she’d always melted in Olivier’s arms in seconds, after, when they were finally alone.

Where was all that? Days ago, she’d had it. Days ago, she’d ached to lose it, but knew she had to let it go. Days ago she’d closed the casket on this, and now she knew for sure Ianthe wouldn’t reopen it.

But why did it have to hurt so much now? Why did it feel like she was rubbing salt in the wound? It wasn’t even a recent wound… it wasn’t a—

Olivier opened her eyes. It was such old pain, indeed. Why would she be dreaming about something so old? So irrelevant now… She didn’t even accurately remember what Ianthe had looked like up close, or where her moles were, or the exquisite feel of her fingers on her. It’d been too many years to remember, fifteen years too many.
And everything she’d carried with her all the way to Briggs in remembrance, in her youth, was all gone now, then why did it still hurt? Hadn’t she made sure to fill those holes with more important things, things that would keep her country safe, her people safe, herself safe?

Hadin’t she made sure neither her body nor her mind ever felt the world crumbling around her because of a woman again?

Chapter End Notes

I hadn't noticed up until now just how goddamn nice it feels to write about life up north ^^, I'm enjoying writing this fic a lot (more than I should, probably hehehe)
Buccaneer heard her coming before he saw her appear under the thin light of the corridor. She stomped rather than walked—always had, as far as he was concerned. It was what told her apart when she toured around Briggs on her own. She tended to. Everybody else at Briggs was always with someone, but if she had any place to go to, she did so on her own. Most of the time she just ditched both Buccaneer and Miles if she could, she didn’t need an entourage.

“Good morning, sir,”

Olivier growled in response. It was hardly ever a ‘good morning’.

“Any news?” she asked.

“There’s no new reports. We’re still waiting.”

She nodded curtly. It would still be a few days, most likely, until the soldiers she’d sent to the mountains were back.

They began walking together—a rarity—while they discussed the Drachma issue, as ever. The situation wasn’t much improved, they hadn’t had any developments in a while. Drachma didn’t come forward with any sort of offence, but its army was there, somewhere, concealed and waiting to pounce. As long as it stayed that way, there was nothing much that could be done except waiting them out.

As it was customary, Olivier made sure to catch a glimpse of the newbies, not because she felt any interest in how they were adapting, but rather to see if they were adapting at all as they should be by now. If Briggs was clockwork, somebody needed to stay on top of rusty gears.

Predictably, they ran into Austin, a thin mess of a man almost falling asleep against a wall. Not much of an impressive sight to behold.

“Soldier,” she called. “You’re on your mark.”

“As-as you ordered, sir,” he said, trying not to yawn in front of his commander.

“Good,” she replied simply, approvingly.

“Sir.”

She and Buccaneer continued on their way, there was nothing else to see here. Everybody else was on watch duty as well, what with it being so early in the morning. She’d have to climb to the top of the wall to ensure everything was going normally there as well; maybe later…

“Make sure he leaves for bed as soon as his shift is over.”

Buccaneer frowned.

“He will anyway,” she clarified. “Just wake him after a while. There’s things to do.”

Today, of all days, the plans for the tank were finally getting the get-go. Or so Olivier hoped. She’d
seen the beasts in Drachman lands, years ago. She was being realistic by anticipating to them having
improved their warfare and preemptively upgrading her own.

He chuckled. “I’ll make sure to do that.”

“And stop making that face, Captain,” she barked at him. “This is none of your business, just do as
you’re told.”

Buccaneer merely nodded at her, ready to leave. But she could tell he was biting back a smile. It was
obvious why; he thought all of this funny, how couldn’t he? He knew exactly the kind of woman she
was, the bastard.

She didn’t tell anyone she was leaving.

They didn’t need her. To be frank, they’d only needed her at first. For adherence, so their cohesive
unit of a body would have a head. But lately Olivier was merely a puppeteer. Her days of glory had
long since passed. All they did around the fort was rebuild broken things, innovate, and fend
Drachma off.

She didn’t really have to be present for much of that, she just was because she took interest. Can’t
run a place if you don’t know it well. She merely signed reports back and forth for the idiots at
Central Command, demoted or promoted people either under orders or personal decision, and made
sure to keep the particularly idiotic alive since the rest knew how to handle themselves.

She left the fort again that day because this spring season promised to be quite lenient on the north,
and she had better take advantage on this weather before it started to get unbearably dry on her skin.
Plus, even if the food was generally terrible up there, it was a little bit better than the one at Briggs’
kitchen, caught up between mountains and trapped under the unforgiving sun and any storm that
loomed over the land.

She rode down to Iver that afternoon, looking for nothing but a bit of fresh air (as if she didn’t have
access to that atop her wall. She was honestly disappointed with her lying-to-herself skills).

There were a few instances along the lines of ‘good day, General Armstrong’ coming from people
who were already used to seeing her from time to time. But she didn’t stop to reciprocate any
greeting and instead just went right where she always went. To drown the spring mood in sweet
food.

The place-owner saw her enter and already knew what she wanted. This was the only bakery slash
cake shop in miles and miles, and she wasn’t really much of a regular but a … familiar face. Familiar
enough she wouldn’t have to speak much.

The man handed her a plate of her favorite dessert and a spoon and she sat down in the tables in the
street, halfway in the sun halfway in the shade. The gentle light of late March shone down on her. It
made her feel like she belonged to this soil, even if she’d been born somewhere else.

She was from the north, after all. Not by blood, not by birth. But she was. The north was hers, and
she was the north. She had her reputation to uphold, and then a reputation everybody attributed to
her. Life was thus, and she couldn’t fight life off, much as she wished to.

But she was getting soft lately, it wasn’t escaping her as much as she pretended it was. Months ago,
she would’ve walked past sleepy Austin without paying him any mind. She wouldn’t have felt bad
for it, either. He would have never called her ‘boss’ again, would have learned his place, and would have interiorized what his role was in her community, what was expected of him until she let him go or promoted him.

Some people had been at Briggs longer than she had, especially Buccaneer. He was older than her by far, older than most around here. He’d seen the early days of the Briggs she knew. People like him and Miles—who’d arrived years later when Olivier had already been general—had stayed, loyal to the north and the fort, and would probably die here, where they all belonged. But then there were soldiers who came and went, sent up there by superiors who sought to punish them or harden them. These men served their time at Briggs and then returned to wherever they’d come from only to be replaced by a new legion of newbies. Newbies normally didn’t last long. Olivier wasn’t sure she wanted them to, she was used to seeing the same faces in the morning, to using the same names. Having to learn new ones wasn’t exhausting, but it wasn’t routine either. It took effort, and time that she didn’t want to have.

Normally, she would let them be, teach them what she could, make them fit perfectly into the dynamics of the fort. That, she was extraordinary at: leading, being in charge. Lately, though, she’d grown tenderer with them, permissive, even … kind. In her own way, of course.

But it was hard not to be so at times. She remembered, poorly as it was, what it felt like to be new to the coldest harshest place in the country. She had her scars to show for it. Other people didn’t need to in order to become one of her people; that was the only source to her particular kindness.

She’d need to stop cutting them all slack as if it were meat, though. She was going to return to her old ways, back when she’d kept Miles by her side out of practicality, not sympathy. Or that’s what she told herself. Miles had been needed. Sorely. Amestris couldn’t be held together by force of one limited point of view, there were many more to consider, many more to fight from. Defending a country is more than just standing up for a mere region of it.

*Perhaps there won’t be any more situations when I need to be who they think I am,* she thought to herself.

And as she did, she realized there was someone in the middle of the square that wasn’t supposed to be there, was she?

*That woman again,* Olivier thought. *I told her to get lost.*

She had, certainly, turned a deaf ear. People didn’t just do that and got away with it. Olivier had given a direct order, it wasn’t like she’d slacked off and just said something bland. Olivier had not said a bland thing since she was five.

This was… *insubordination.* Of sorts. The woman was a civilian, clearly. Too happy to blend in, too happy sitting there in the sun, scribbling on her notebook. Like it didn’t matter, like it wasn’t… disruptive.

*The Impregnable Wall of Briggs,* she’d called Olivier. She was more than used to all the possible turns of the usual phrase—*The Northern Wall of Briggs*—, yet this one resonated in her with novel nuances. She wasn’t all too sure what hid behind that choice of words: ‘impregnable’. Surely not good, but still… the rest of the text hadn’t felt aggressive to her. On the contrary, if anything.

Finishing the last of her tiramisu with all the time in the world, although she really didn’t have it, Olivier kept an eye on the girl. She was just… there, taking up space as if there was plenty in this crammed town. Smiling at passersby and writing them things that they accepted graciously. It shook things up in this town that was so used to its own inner rhythm, but she was part of them already.
They treated her as such.

Perhaps she was and Olivier had simply not picked her out from the Iver crowd before. But that argument was easily debunked by the fact that Olivier was positive she would have if the girl had been always there. Olivier wasn’t one to be completely oblivious to the people around her, especially those that just had something to them—

She stopped right there. There was nothing unusual in the writing girl, nothing at all. Nothing to observe. Just a girl on a chair selling fake stories to people, making a bigger chaos than she had to. Olivier frowned as intensely as her face would go. A girl who didn’t seem to know pants existed, apparently...

During the two days Olivier had seen her, she’d been wearing flowery dresses like she was spring turned human. She probably smelled like spring too, like sunny warmth and grass and the soft breeze. It was infuriating. Olivier had to do something, she had to make it clear to that woman she couldn’t just … go on doing whatever she was doing. Not after yesterday’s incident.

Nobody stood up to Olivier, nobody. She had to do something, didn’t she? She had to act. Raise her voice. Be noticed. Win. Or else she’d be letting Buccaneer’s completely biased and inaccurate point of view win over hers. She’d be being soft and weak again.

And nobody north of North City survived on weakness and softness and holding back necessary words.

So she left her plate on the small table and a few centz to pay for her self-indulgence, then stomped all the way across the square to the girl in the dress with that ridiculous wide grin that just seemed to attract people.

This time around, Zinnia saw her coming. It was hard not to, she was a tall woman dressed in blue and with a sword almost as large as she was. She stood out. Inevitably. And in fact, Zinnia was thankful for that. Deeply. Not having seen her coming would’ve resulted in as awkward a situation as the other day’s.

No, this time she was ready. She closed her notebook, a torn-off page sticking out a little, and held it nervously on her lap, hands shielding it from the sun.

“Afternoon, Major General.” Zinnia was particularly proud of that only before she’d said it. Everybody just went around calling her ‘General’, because it was shorter and flowed easier, so maybe using something as specific as that wasn’t the best thing to do if she wanted to pretend she was perfectly above anything related to the general.

Olivier seemed to think along the same line. She slit her eyes at Zinnia and hissed:

“I thought I was very clear with you.”

“Yes, you were,” Zinnia reassured her. “I’m not selling today, just writing for free. Is that okay?”

Olivier’s each and every brain cell was put up to the arduous task of thinking up a logical reason to keep going, but all that was coming to mind was the truth: that it was, in fact, okay.

I guess I can’t fucking banish her now, can I?

“This is not a real occupation,” Olivier said instead. “I would suggest you enroll in something actually prolific if you want to survive around here.”
But Zinnia had prepped for that too. *Survival, ha!* Zinnia knew herself, she knew she was like a weed in that she would always make it hard for people to get rid of her. But, in all honesty, if Olivier had pressed things just a little further, using her body language and the presence her voice had, Zinnia might’ve lost it right there right then and become a stuttery little fool.

“Who’s to say I haven’t already?” She smiled as radiantly as she could. If this military woman was going to be rude, Zinnia would shower her in grace and the most profound of respects, although never in liking, never the true kind. Just decency. Nothing more and nothing else. “It’s just really nice out here in the sun, General, wouldn’t you agree?”

Olivier almost snorted out loud because it indeed was, but also because she saw through Zinnia’s attempt at courtesy. *So, kitty likes to scratch…*

“And from the looks of it,” Zinnia continued, slowly, trying to savor the fact that she was almost pulling this off. Her knees were beginning to shake a little for reasons unknown, but as long as Olivier kept her distrustful, almost believing eyes on her own and not on her legs, she’d be fine. Or not, maybe she preferred having Olivier stare at her knees, eye contact was… too much sometimes, “we’re both on break.”

“Get back to work,” Olivier ordered. And then her brain gave the rest of her an order to leave, as it would be customary after saying something like that, but her body didn’t follow. She watched as her hand, acting of its own accord, leapt forward and buried itself in the girl’s notebook only to pull the torn-off page and fold it, hidden. “And I’ll take this with me.”

“Have a good day!” Zinnia managed, past her own bewilderment. She’d… just grabbed it. As if it was for her, which it was, but Olivier had no way to know *that* beforehand. She could’ve just stolen a perfectly bad piece of writing, of even smut, and she’d just not given half a fuck and just…

*Who the fuck does she think she is??*, Zinnia thought. Was this going to be like this every day? Was Olivier going to come back here every day to yell at her and demand she gave her whatever she’d meant to sell or just gift for free? Thank god Zinnia had prepared an actual bit of text for her today, just to see if she took the bait (which she had, albeit in unforeseen ways), because she would’ve probably fallen on her face right in front of the general if it hadn’t been for that. She wasn’t sure she wasn’t about to anyway.

She watched as Olivier left royally, head held high. She definitely had to own at least a few shops in here, that couldn’t be normal. That air of wealth and temperance was much too extraordinary, even ardent for a place like this, for people like these. Anybody just… was a mere shadow compared to her. It was a strange, strange phenomenon how a sole woman could occupy so much mental space and in such a distinct way.

But as she walked away, Olivier’s breathing was definitely not near normal rates, despite her perfect control of the outer image she gave. Learning to hold herself in public had been a lesson she’d always be grateful to her rigid upbringing for. Right now, it helped to try and hide the fact that her cheeks, normally cool and soft and paler than snow, were flaming with something she couldn’t quite name. Her cheeks *never* burned. Whatever emotion she could bear within she’d always kept perfectly contained, exceptions noted. This, though… This had to be a mistake, caused by something she hadn’t been aware of. It must have been the little while she’d spent in the sun, she must’ve gotten sunburned, yes. That would explain it. It made for a wonderful explanation anybody would believe.

There’d been no such sun in the north since she’d come fifteen years ago, but *of course* it’d been the sun.

Yet even if she’d found a half-decent way to excuse her flushing cheeks, would she ever find a
reason for her churning stomach? For her trembling limbs? For having just… snatched a piece of paper that probably had nothing on it?

Deep down, even in the darkest corners of her own white lie, Olivier’s mind only had one thought to dwell on: *Little flowery fucker just ruined my dessert, didn’t she?*

Was it progress if she admitted it? Or was it denial if she kept deliberately ignoring why?

Olivier smoothed out the small piece of paper, guiding her horse back to Briggs with her other hand, and read the words written on it that could’ve been addressed to anyone but in the end were hers and hers alone to read.

*She looks down at you from a height that even the Olympians would have fought wars to acquire, but her eyes—roughened by the constant tide against granite stone—don’t aim to demean, just unnerve.*

*And the gentleness they hide,*

*that’s the real treasure one finds if one looks up at her and smiles.*

*Fuck,* Olivier thought.

Chapter End Notes

aaaaaaaaaaaa this has so little dialogue, but since it was mainly just thoughts & repressed emotions and the like I didn’t feel like adding any more banter (yet). I'll try and fix that in future chapters, though
The phone rang when Zinnia was still sleeping. She literally leapt out of bed, pushing the covers as far away as she could, and ran to pick it up; she didn’t know for how long it’d been ringing.

Breathless, she answered.

“Everything okay, northerner?” Anthony’s voice said, teasing her as always.

“What did you just—? You call me to call me a northerner?”

“I have a few minutes off of work. What’s up? How’re you doing?”

“Your work hours are … messy.” She would have to get ready to leave soon enough too. Candie wasn’t too rigid with the schedule as long as she had company and conversation, but Zinnia liked to be on time. It felt more like a job that way.

“Life’s messy.”

“I was gonna get going too, but I guess I can scrape off a second of my extremely busy day to talk.” She said it with little to no sarcasm, but Anthony saw right through her and started laughing.

“Pfffffff so you’re doing nothing, then?”

“I’m doing nothing,” Zinnia confirmed emphatically, defeated in her purpose to hide it. She might as well just go ahead and take pride in it. “Selling old books.”

“That’s the dream,” he teased in low voice. She could practically hear him laughing his head off, no matter how hard he tried not do it out loud.

“One word to my parents about this, Anthony, and I swear I’ll come down and – and – and…”

He actually snorted at this, finally given up on hiding his amusement.

“Short of ideas, are we?”

“Just give me time,” she joked. Then her voice got slightly softer, slightly enough so she could conceal how much she actually cared. “How are they doing, though? It’s been a while.”

“Just call them sometime. Your dad’s always at home.”

“He’s no longer spending time at the butchery?” she asked softly, confused. When she’d still been living down there, her father hadn’t left the shop much, he liked the gossip all those people coming in brought.

“Yeah, I mean, occasionally, I guess,” Anthony paused, almost as if he’d been made aware he’d slipped up. He quickly recovered, though. “Still, Zin, drop a line sometimes, come on.”

“I wouldn’t really know what to say.”

“Say what you say to me, for instance.” Anthony snorted. “Well, maybe not literally.”
They both instantly recalled a few instances with Zinnia swearing like a sailor at Anthony for various reasons, and Anthony losing his shit because he always said she looked—and sounded—like the opposite of a person who swears *that* much. She’d called him a long list of insulting things in jest and he’d shut up, but she could tell he’d been holding back a few guffaws that one time. Well, *every* time, really.

“*Definitely* not literally,” she laughed.

She could hear him breathe slowly, after, trying to decide what to say next and how in reference to what was being discussed beyond jokes and silliness. God, Anthony was so careful with his words, the little idiot.

“They’re not angry at you. Nobody’s angry at you,” he offered in the end. “You told me to remind you next time, so I *am*. Things are just as they were when you left.”

“I haven’t *left*. I’m just… away,” Zinnia muttered to the phone. Away because ‘home’ had compressed her to a portion of who she really was (whoever she ended up being), because she only had Anthony back there and a family that wanted her to follow their path, to belong in their tiny perfectly modeled lives. Zinnia’d just wanted to explore, to see every inch of green in Central and then move on to other places. She’d wanted to exhaust all the beauty in the world, thinking that this way she’d eventually find a beauty worth staying somewhere for. That she’d find something she wouldn’t desperately ache to leave one morning.

“Regretting the whole north thing already?” he asked softly.

“It’s too soon to actually regret anything.” She passed a hand over the back of her neck, trying to alleviate the sudden tension in her muscles.

Because her words were lies, she actually *had* reasons to regret this. Or the closest thing to one. A mountain of a reason. Thank god Zinnia had more guts than she’d anticipated, and genetically inherited stubbornness, or else it would’ve made her quit Iver completely.

*This* was her chance, this was her chance to tell her moral compass about it, or at least just get it off her chest. She didn’t even have to speak directly of anybody, she could just pretend it was a general feeling of discomfort, the taste of the food or just plain old nostalgia for simpler times.

But she was soft, and weak. And it would be one hell of a job to try and be anything else.

“Anthony, I… there’s actually a few things going on I desperately need you to laugh at me about.”

“Oh, yeah, sure…” he drifted off. “Just…”

She instantly felt he wasn’t listening. *Such bad timing…*

There was some noise on his end, probably someone calling him back to work. Slacking off to speak on the phone wasn’t what he was getting paid for, but there was no telling Anthony what to do.

“Sorry, Zin, break’s over.” He sounded truly distraught to have to cut her off at such a moment, so she let him go. “Catch you later. Bye.”

“Yeah, bye.”

*Third time’s the charm?* Zinnia thought as she hung up, sighing.

Deep down she knew there probably wouldn’t be a third time trying to tell him about something
so… irrelevant. Everybody had people in their lives, no matter how uncomplicated these lives were, that made them uncomfortable in any way.

Olivier Armstrong wasn’t her enemy, that was clear, or Zinnia’d already be running south with her tail between her legs—but she did inspire very troublesome feelings in Zinnia. And for good reason.

She posed a threat. The threat of a threat, really. A reminder than Zinnia was already on thin ice, in many different ways, and that if she slipped and cracked its surface, she’d be ruining everything.

It was simply so much easier to just leap away from the ice, onto the safety and cushioned comfort that snow provided. It was so, so much easier to just… run away.

Things didn’t change much in the next few days, as expected. When Anthony called again, eager to hear what Zinnia’d wanted to tell him, she backed out and just ranted about Iver. The smallest village in the world, known for a dessert few people liked, and hidden in miles and miles of plants and mountains. It was like living inside a marble. You could see the outside world while being trapped in it, and yet… it just remained a beautiful prison.

The sun, the smell of the flowers, her chair in the main street near the square, her many portraits about people whose names she had trouble remembering, Candie and her stories while they patiently awaited customers.

Was a comforting prison any less of a prison, though? Well, no, of course not. And all Zinnia needed to be positive about that was being dutifully reminded of who was in charge of running her prison.

“Am I going to keep finding you here every day without fault?” Olivier sounded annoyed today, but barely interested in hiding it, when she marched past Zinnia’s spot like she was forcing herself to care.

“Depends.” That’d been so unwitty of Zinnia to say. “Will you keep coming every day?”

Olivier’s eyes scrutinized her sitting figure, legs crossed in the shade of the late afternoon and still bare. Did this woman really not know of the existence of pants?

“You’re on my way,” she simply commented in the end.

“I’ll just move aside, then,” Zinnia said chirpily, dragging her chair across the cobblestone to the sunny patch that filtered from the minor street behind her, but deep inside she wanted to confront this lady as loudly as loud went.

It was things like those that ticked her off. There was a very distinct energy coming from the general, not exactly hatred, but still powerful enough to scare Zinnia a little into… submission? Quiet defiance?

Olivier came and went, but always did so on her own terms and holding her shoulders back, almost marking everything around Zinnia as her territory when there was no need because Zinnia was quite literally doing nothing that could count as a threat.

Was doing nothing a punishable offense in this little prison of a town?

Sometimes, though—and as spring advanced, ‘sometimes’ became a far more common occurrence —, Zinnia would simply gift Olivier with a meek ‘good afternoon’, just to get a reaction, no matter
how small. This reaction tended to consist of a grunt and then Olivier blatantly ignoring the interaction, but it meant that Zinnia held at least one tenth of the power: and that was her capacity to rise over personal affronts against herself.

But Olivier could see it in her eyes, the ‘I am better than you’ power stance. And she smirked to herself when she was about to pass Zinnia, because she knew just how to snap it into a thousand pieces.

“General, you’re needed downstairs.” Miles came to see her one morning, catching her while she pushed all her paperwork aside to leave. For a moment, he didn’t know whether to come in or just leave her be, but then he gulped and added: “It’s about the tank, sir.”

“You’re not my secretary,” she said. “Have them send someone else next time and get back to work. I need you organizing this week’s out-of-bounds patrols.”

Awaiting his reply, which didn’t come, she stood up. She was going to, anyway. Albeit for different reasons.

“Shall I walk with you, General?”

“You may,” she conceded with a nod.

When they got to the elevator, she finally spoke again:

“I haven’t received notice of any of our mountain patrols yet.”

“As far as I know, there hasn’t been any news since the last time,” Miles said, confirming her suspicions.

The inspections on foreign land were usually quiet incursions that took weeks to complete because of the stealth involved. Olivier had once taken the next step from silent observation to full-on spying missions, but Drachma had responded with grenades. Her men had come back with day-old wounds, and Captain Buccaneer had lost an arm and had been on the brink of losing his life.

Ever since, Briggs sent patrols to the snowy mountains, no matter the season, to watch the border where the eyes of Briggs could not reach. A messenger would come down to the fort from time to time to give a status report, but lately there’d only been one, meant for the last mountain men brigade to pass on the torch to another.

There hadn’t been any new information since, either.


“It won’t be for long,” Miles said. And she nodded.

War was brewing. If Drachma brought it down on their heads, they had to be ready. That’s what Olivier told herself as they reached the Engineering Department, that all of this was in the name of upholding Briggs’ reputation.

Survival.

That’s what had inspired all this engineering, all the defense operations and the negotiations, failures as they were. Olivier hadn’t expected them to hold for as long as they had, but if anything good had
come out of that was the absolute diligence on everybody under her command. If Drachma came—later than sooner, she thought—, at least they would be able to put up a decent fight other than just outlasting them in a siege.

“I hope whatever you’re whispering about is important enough to make me personally oversee this,” she addressed the engineers directly when she was presented with the plans for a war tank.

They gulped in her presence, unsure about how to word the reason for having her come down.

“It’s just a prototype, it works but…” Both men looked at each other, obviously wary of her to some extent. If she was a force of nature on a good day, today she could easily tear them apart with half a glare.

“But?” Olivier pressed it, arching an eyebrow.

“There’s much to be improved,” one of them said. “Firing range, mostly. Speed. Maneuver control. But otherwise it’s bulky enough.”

“This is meant to guarantee victory from a distance and deliver a flawless attack, not merely scare them with the sight. They know what a tank is.”

Probably the task of building a super machine on the clock wasn’t the most compassionate thing to impose on these men, but Olivier recognized the strength required in this situation in the eyes of her soldiers.

“Ensure those faults are made insignificant in further modifications,” she concluded in the end. “And abstain from sending for me to inspect any more prototypes unless they are fully developed and functional.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t burn anything in the process, as always,” she said before she turned around and left, hair waving behind her. Miles followed quickly, he had a few concerns he wanted to share with the general, and he’d already finished most of the day’s work calculating schedules for patrols and watch duty inside the fort, even if she would certainly insist on him finishing up more than just ‘most’.

“Will tanks truly be effective?” he asked as they walked to Olivier’s office. Even at its inception, the tank project hadn’t resonated much with Major Miles. She understood so, he came from times of relative peace with the north, and his only acquaintance with the war had been the illegitimate discrimination he’d always suffer for being part of the race Central had meant to eradicate in Ishval.

“Against a full-blown offensive?” she replied. “No doubt.”

“I don’t think that’s up Drachma’s alley right now. They are playing the same game we are.”

She thought long and hard about it before replying.

“You’re probably right, Major. But if they’ve got tanks, ours will be better.” She smirked. “Having the upper hand is our specialty.”

“The Mountain Men haven’t returned yet.” He reminded her again that they had no upper hand without information. And all they saw from Briggs was the border, clear and bare like that flower girl’s legs in the sun.

“I am aware.”
“That’s not good news, is it? It’s spring. In winter, it made more sense for them to take their time, but now?” he said. “My question is, is their silence owed solely to lack of any new data to share?”

She glared at him, but she had to admit there was some truth to his words. She wondered how long he’d been meaning to say this to her.

“Do you know of a better approach to this, Miles? Because if you do I will be thrilled to hear your proposal.” Olivier had to remind herself that she valued his take on things so as to not be too biting with him just because she didn’t want to have this conversation right now, when she’d been meaning to leave for Iver for at least half an hour. But this was her job, and to hell with rich desserts and annoying girls until this was done.

“I just thought that perhaps a less… direct means of attack and defense would be beneficial for the fort.”

“You and half of us…” She sighed. “If you come up with anything more concrete than that, put it forward. Meanwhile I’ll have to find a way to make up for our… bluntness in combat.”

“Sorry if I have offended you,” he muttered, realizing how she might’ve interpreted his previous statement.

She ignored him, rolling her eyes. “Find the Captain and come see me, I’d like to discuss this with you both.”

A few minutes later, the three of them were gathered in Olivier’s office. The leader and her subordinates, awaiting news or orders, or perhaps both.

She looked at them. At the big bulky captain whose wrinkled and weather-beaten face was always lit up by his ridiculous and loud jokes. At the soldier who she had saved, but who really had saved Briggs when he’d chosen to stand by her. They both had. Her two indisputable second-in-command, if not in practice, at least in confidential moments like this.

Then, she exposed the problem Miles had spotted in their modus operandi, adding to it that they would need, from now on, to find the way to juggle both the tank operation and something else that had not taken a definite shape in Olivier’s mind yet. Something that would grant Briggs a reputation for stealth as well as for their resilience.

Buccaneer, of course, suggested at once that they upgrade their automail situation, wiggling his right arm at them so they’d know what he was talking about.

“A legion of superhumans against those bastards would be lethal, General,” he said.

“As long as you weren’t their commander, Buccaneer,” Miles said, laughing. “That’d be a quick defeat.”

“We don’t have the budget,” Olivier objected, frowning at the two of them and their out-of-place camaraderie in these moments. “Nor are we going to maim half our population for mechanical superiority. That’s what the tank will be for.”

“I’m just saying… we’d have the element of surprise, if it ever comes to that. This cat-and-mouse game is getting old, General, and you know the Drachman…” Buccaneer said with a big toothy smile on his face. “It’d scare them back to their country, seeing big old men like me with a chainsaw for an arm.”

Olivier snorted at the image. “I don’t think so, no. We’re looking for subtlety, effectiveness,
something we can use from a distance, not just a display of power.” We already have that now.

Resting her chin on her hand, she thought about every major war she knew of. For years, the intermittent conflict with Drachma had entailed, mostly, carnage on both sides and no resolution in sight. Drachma tried to gain territory, Amestris fought them off, then the situation was reversed in some way or another. And now it was a tug of war where no side was tugging harder, although both sides’ hands were firmly wrapped around the cord, waiting each other out.

Then she remembered Ishval, a permanent hole through Amestris’ membrane and one of the military’s worst mistakes. Perhaps she could allow herself to think this way because she’d had no say it in, not having been involved when it all had come to an end in the final and bloodiest year of the war. She’d been too far north, busy protecting the same old border where she was stuck now. But Olivier had known people who’d fought, not that many years ago... A legion of alchemists, soldiers...

If she took the murderous approach of alchemy being used against civilians, turned it around and used it to improve the quality of the work being done here at Briggs against their neighborly enemy...

That, she could work with. If her infamous soldiers could learn, then perhaps…

“More snipers?” Buccaneer asked, still thinking about her previous words.

Olivier shook her head.

“Something we’ll be in history books for.” She made a pause; she’d had an idea. “Gentlemen, are you familiar with the Presidential Order 3066?”

Chapter End Notes

god, i had so much fun writing this chapter... I've so many ideas for the whole story I can't possibly fit them all into the general plot but so far it's been an amazing experience to try and decide what's going to happen next (not to mention how much reading I've been doing on FMA trivia ^^)
Like the river flows

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fort Briggs could’ve well been considered a patchwork of many crafts. Housing several departments, all of them as various as variety went, it had been built pragmatically, to accommodate all its numbers comfortably within reason. Communal dorms and baths were the norm around the fortress, as well as tiny common rooms for the occasional break in the soldiers’ shifts. Only the senior positions were offered small individual living quarters. But Briggs also counted with a few amenities that weren’t 100% so. Among one of those rooms that didn’t fit into the ‘do first, think later’ way of things was the library.

And it was a well-provided library, at that. Olivier had used to visit it much more often than she did now, when her daily battles had consisted of surviving instead of ensuring other people did. It’d provided a good refuge, and eventually a ladder. Yet with her ascension to power and control, coming here had stopped being so necessary, and she only ever turned to books when she had the time or was at a complete loss otherwise. Even if she knew most of the volumes on those dusty shelves, she could always come across something new that would broaden her perspective.

Nobody was posted there. Whoever wanted to consult a book or just read something quietly knew they could come and spend some time in silence. And then, once in a blue moon, the cleaning shift would dust a little so the room wouldn’t smell like it’d been left to its own devices two centuries ago.

Olivier pushed the door open and she did get that same feeling, nonetheless. Like she’d been jerked back in time, just not centuries. Perhaps that was a lucky thing, she knew at least where to look and where to start.

This room was where she’d learned about advanced strategy before life had taught it to her, where she’d trained her mind to see better and to see further. Back in the olden days, Olivier hadn’t taken much interest in alchemy, mostly owed to her brother certainly being interested himself. But she’d read through some basic manuals just in case it ever came in handy.

“Well, I guess it does now,” she muttered to herself as she reached out to the last shelf to her left, without need for standing on her toes, and dug out the book she’d been looking for.

Basic Alchemic Concepts – Volume I. There should be a collection of those volumes somewhere, but she didn’t remember seeing them here. She’d have to ask the local places, probably even send someone down to North City.

Olivier took the book to the only table in the room and, supporting her face with her hand, she began to turn the pages, skimming them for key words.

Alex had always liked this. Alex had loved it, he hadn’t seen unfathomable mysteries in them, he’d pushed through until he’d made sense of everything. A soldier and an alchemist, Olivier thought now. Quite the dangerous mix.

She, on the other hand, had never understood much of it. Flows of energy didn’t matter, things were what they were to her, they didn’t have the potential to be changed. Alchemy was as good as a dark kind of magic she had no need for, no use for.

“Funny how things turn out…”
Equivalent exchange laws, the circles of transmutation, the origin of alchemy in Amestris…

...as of today, alchemy as a science is understood to have been born in the seventeenth century. Amestris’ neighboring countries each have differing views on what it is, as well as utilizing other methods that may stem from the same roots as alchemy. Xingese tradition, for instance, relies on alkahestry, a variant of alchemy that focuses on the flow of life and its various medical applications…

“Alkahestry, huh?” Olivier said out loud, the word tasting familiar in her mouth.

Briggs might not have had a casualty in over fifteen years, but they sure had had wounded in greater numbers than she liked to admit. Buccaneer had lost an entire arm, boosting the developmental trials of automail. But there’d been others, regardless of carefulness and skill, that had suffered similar fates.

Accidents happened, as much as she wanted to avoid them. People slipped on ice, burned their hands while cooking, and go hurt while in the mountain range trying to outsmart Drachma. At least the war was on pause now, but for however long that would last was a mystery. Better to be prepared than to mourn new losses or make fatal mistakes.

Alchemy read as a complicated thing to invest on, and costly and time-consuming as well. Teaching a bunch of privates how to operate something that didn’t have a solid shape to hang on to would take too much time. But if alkahestry’s main focus was on healing, that she could work with.

An untouchable army that moved forward no matter what, resurfacing from the snow like daisies. Even Drachma would hesitate at the sight.

Olivier read on for several more minutes, going back to the index to see if there was anything more on this alkahestry concept other than those few lines, but all the chapters strictly versed, as hinted by the title, on the basics of alchemy. She’d have to find some more books, then.

Or… the thought came without her being able to stop it. Send for Ianthe.

Ianthe sure would love that, getting her first letter after fifteen years. Olivier wondered if she’d even expect an apology or would simply tear the letter into pieces without caring what was inside. It’d been a long time, perhaps she’d deign to read it. Perhaps she’d find it in herself, past the raging hatred and the pain, to answer Olivier’s call for help.

“What is even the flow of things?” Olivier had asked, lying on her back on Ianthe’s house’s small garden under the tender shade of the magnolia tree.

Ianthe had laughed. “It’s not something concrete.”

“If it’s not concrete, how can you know it’s there?”

Then Ianthe had rolled on her side, leaning on her elbow, and had gazed at her in a way she’d never look at another living creature. Olivier had gone limp where she was. The presence those eyes had…

“Have you ever been in love?” Ianthe had asked then, softly, curiously, rather than just seeking an answer to continue explaining.

“Is that a trick question?”

“Have you?” Ianthe chuckled, ignoring her hesitance.
Olivier’s eyes hadn’t left hers for as long as it took her to say—to confess: “I have.”

And Ianthe’s smile had grown sly.

“How can you know that you have if it’s not something concrete, something you can, say, hold in your hand?”

Olivier had cracked a smile, admitting defeat. Her fingers had found Ianthe’s.

“Oh, but I can hold it in my hand…”

Zinnia popped up from under a puff of dust, hair falling on her face. She looked just like a woman that had been saving texts from dust-driven extinction for a couple of hours.

“Where are the cooking books?” she said.

“We have cooking books?” Candie asked. She kept going in the back and resurfacing with a few dozen volumes in her hand, leaving them either on the counter or on the floor near the shelves Zinnia was taking care of.

“I remember seeing something like that around a while ago.”

“I still don’t understand why tidying the place up will help.”

Zinnia rolled her eyes.

“Efficiency,” she said. “In the future we’ll find books faster this way.”

“But I’ve always done it this way.”

The chaotic way? she thought. But she couldn’t really say that out loud. Some people did a pretty good job at living messily, thinking that just because they thought they knew where things are nothing would go unnoticed right under their noses. Like the cooking books. Those were just playing with the two of them, at this point, no matter how intense Zinnia got at organizing this place.

She exhaled dramatically. “Well, now I’m here. Things have, in a way, changed already, haven’t they? They can keep changing.”

“You’re a smart little flower, aren’t you?” Candie pinched her cheeks like Zinnia’s grandmother had used to and went back to the few boxes of books that covered most of the floor, trapping them between the shelves and the opening to the shop itself.

“Not a flower,” Zinnia said, pouting.

Candie still didn’t lose the smile. In fact, she began laughing loudly.

“A smart little helper, then.”

Zinnia blushed a little, catching the hint. “I just can’t find anything if it’s all so not organized.”

They both stared at each other for a second. Zinnia had the feeling there was a little bit of friendly sass coming her way, Candie sure liked her humor. But in the end the older woman just shook her head as if she was disposing of a particular thought and just said:
“Cooking books, right?”

Zinnia nodded enthusiastically. “Cooking books.”

“Somebody really came to my bookshop and asked for cooking books?”

Zinnia laughed (because it was funny) and shrugged (because it really wasn’t any of her business). It was something worthy of having a national holiday, truth be told. An inhabitant of the north wants to learn how to cook! “One should never lose faith?”

“Mark my words,” Candie said. “The only two good edible things this land will ever produce is: 1) cream for the desserts, and 2) beef.”

Zinnia raised her eyebrows, eyes open wide. “I’ve never tried the beef.”

“Don’t,” Candie said solemnly, going back to what she was doing. “There’s a reason we’re better known for the desserts.”

Zinnia shook her head, laughing softly, and stood on her tiptoes to look in the higher shelves. She could hear Candie rummaging with cages of old books in the back, behind the translucent blue curtain that was never fully closed.

All she’d found so far had nothing to do with cooking, or food for that matter. Although she had seen a particularly entertaining book about hunting. She was positive by now these people ate bear meat.

She was intent on finding the books, though. Having an obstacle in the way didn’t deter her much, it posed a challenge. One of the good ones, without any risk-taking and no danger. Just her mind and a room with hundreds of titles to read through before she found the one.

Candie walked across the room carrying one of the heavy-looking box. Zinnia quickly went to help. She got the box from her boss’s hands before she could complain.

“Here, I’ll take care of this. You keep looking meanwhile.”

“Sure thing,” Candie said, beaming.

Zinnia held the box in her arms for a total of half a minute before she started questioning her decision to start working out. Arms that once had been suppler were now soft and not exactly fit for weight-lifting. She just carefully dropped the box on the floor and immediately knelt by it, grabbing each book to take a quick look at the cover and then putting them in the lower shelves. First, they’d find a place for each volume, and then they’d start figuring out how to rearrange them.

When the box was half empty, she had to peep inside to grab the next book, then stretch out long as she was to fit them properly in the almost-crowded shelf to her right. She could feel her skirt rising up a little more than she was comfortable, but they had no customers so far and if someone walked in, she’d hear them in time to fix herself up a little.

She didn’t, of course, hear in time.

“Good morning,” a familiar voice said, with none of the usual icy nuances to it. Olivier’s voice.

Zinnia’s first reaction was to, quickly as she could, tug down at her skirt, but when she tried to turn around to see who it was, she practically threw herself to the floor, thighs suddenly hitting the moldy wood, legs apart because she’d had no time to close them.
“Morning!” she said in an usually high-pitched voice, getting on her feet at the speed of light to go the counter, a foot or two away, and slamming her hands down on it (harder than she meant to) as if that would make the other woman forget what she’d just seen.

*How unprofessional,* Olivier thought. And how ridiculous, too. How could someone be in such a situation while the business’ door was wide open, inviting customers in to… see this level of utmost indecency?

“Oh,” she said instead, frowning. “It’s you.”

“It is indeed,” Zinnia said, trying to regulate her breathing. She was still feeling like she was being taken by surprise over and over again as seconds passed, like Olivier’s eyes were still on places no eyes should be unless Zinnia gave her permission. “I told you I had a job.”

Olivier would’ve asked her, sarcastically, if this was her concept of a job, but she bit her tongue. She had actual business to conduct right now, she couldn’t get distracted by an annoying street flower.

Zinnia tapped her fingers on the counter. “Can I help you with anything?”

Olivier seemed to be pondering whether it would be more or less cost-effective to leave now or stay with her brain in alarm mode.

“I’ll come back another day,” she said in the end.

She was about to turn around and leave when Zinnia intervened, cursing herself right after, as it was customary. But she felt braver in here, sheltered by books and walls. This was her place, after all.

“Well, I’m here *every day,* you know? You might as well just get it over with.”

Olivier hmphed.

“Very telling, how you think there’s anything to get over.”

“I have nothing to give you today,” Zinnia said all of a sudden, remembering. She always wrote after work, sometimes during, but today she’d been busy as hell. “For your trouble.”

Olivier blinked slowly, not following.

“For, you know,” Zinnia explained, “making the effort to ride down every day just to collect your evidence that I’m not selling illegally.”

Olivier almost smiled. As if she came down to Iver for those stupid portraits. No, it would never be that. She couldn’t care any less, even if the goddamn things were piling up in one of her drawers where she kept them. She came here because the proximity allowed her to take more breaks and to eat something sweet while she walked around; because it had quite enchanting views of the mountains, some of them brown and green, some still white at the top; and because the ride down here helped her think. Nothing more.

“I would’ve expected you to give up much sooner,” she said calmly, hoping to embarrass Zinnia enough to shut her up. She hadn’t rebuked the ‘you come to Iver every day to fight me’ part, though.

But, against all odds, Zinnia’s eyes were perfectly serene as well. She did not move an inch, or wrinkle her face in a grimace at the general’s words.

“I haven’t given up.”
Even her words sounded peaceful, conceding in a way. Confessing to Olivier without voicing it that she didn’t plan on ever giving up, for whatever reason. And it wasn’t just to keep this going or to prove she had as much right to write stories in the sun as anybody. There was something else there, something far more profound and incomprehensible by either Zinnia herself or Olivier.

Why did Zinnia keep on writing those honest paragraphs—so brutally honest sometimes Olivier wanted to just crumble them all up and set fire to them all? Did she want the general to see her there every day, defying her orders, challenging her to come closer?

Why did Olivier keep on coming here to receive them as well, to take them in her hand and not look at them until she was a mile away, almost getting to her fort? Did she want to see the flower girl directly disobeying her orders, challenging her to step up and try and win her game… and succeeding in doing so?

Right when the both of them were finally, slowly—meltingly slowly—, arriving to the right conclusions, Candie came in from the back like she wasn’t interrupting anything. And, to be fair, nothing in that small room would have ever given her the impression that she was.

“No luck yet!” she told Zinnia, then she let her mouth open wide when she noticed Olivier there. Her face was proof enough that nobody was ever truly used to seeing her among them. When a queen left her throne behind, her subjects tended to stare. “General Armstrong, good morning. How can we be of assistance?”

“Your…” Olivier gave Zinnia a cold look, getting ready to choose the most inappropriate word she could, out of spite for making her question things that didn’t need questioning, “apprentice was about to get to that, I believe.”

“Zinnia, dear, have you been acquainted? This is—”

Ah, so that’s her name, Olivier thought, smirking to herself. A flower name for a flower girl. So very fitting.

“We’ve met, yes,” Zinnia said with a fake smile.

Candie looked at Zinnia, then at Olivier, then she grinned widely. Her ears would’ve pointed towards the sky if they’d been able to.

“I’ll leave you with her, General.” And with a sly smile, Candie go back to where she’d come from. “I need to get back to finding those wretched cooking books…” She disappeared behind the blue curtain.

There was no further sound to be heard for a couple of long seconds, until Zinnia sighed.

“So,” she said. “What do you need from me?”

For a second, neither knew if Zinnia was asking about the undeniable tension between them or just about Olivier’s purpose in Candie’s bookshop.

“I’m looking for anything you might have on alkahestry.”

Zinnia made a confused face. She’d never heard the term. She probably wouldn’t even know how to spell it. Too many schwas.

“Sorry, I’m not familiar.”
Olivier explained, looking bored and increasingly impatient, covering the basics and, to Zinnia’s joy, the spelling as well. It was only relevant, after all. How else would anybody find a book title with it on the cover?

“If I remember correctly, there’s a few reports on alchemy in general somewhere,” Zinnia was saying, taking a peep into the first shelves near the counter. The ‘I fell on my ass near this shelf but it’s okay, nobody will remember’. “We were in the middle of… renovating. Just give me a second.”

Olivier scoffed. “Please,” she said, “take all the time you need.”

Zinnia got in the back, pushing the blue curtain back and not smoothing it after, and Olivier saw the chaos of books everywhere. Double-rowed on the shelves, strewn over the floor, in boxes.

Thank god this was a small bookshop, or else the mess would have taken days to get slightly organized.

Zinnia went straight to the shelves on the left, brow furrowed and biting her lip subconsciously. She read the titles at the top, then moved on quickly to the middle shelves, then her frown intensified, and she supported herself on the shelf with her palm, leaning forward to take a look at the lower shelves.

She had nice legs for a limp city girl, Olivier found herself thinking. Brown skin that shone slightly in the sun, that hint of muscle that used to be there and now was just a faint memory the girl could probably revive in a few days. When she crouched, finally, her knees complained, snapping the moment in two like a bone.

Olivier almost laughed out loud at herself. This was, without a doubt, ridiculous and absurd and she would not speak a word of it to anyone. She’d been here too long, she should’ve left at the first chance she’d had. But to hell with letting this flower girl get away with having the last word.

And the flower girl stood up in one smooth motion and proceeded to review every last shelf to later return to the counter, empty-handed.

“Nothing in sight, sorry,” she said. “I’ll give it a thorough look later, when we’re done here. What was the name of the thing again?”

“Alkahestry.”

Zinnia wrote it down where she usually took note of the orders.

“If I don’t find anything, I’ll ask Candie if we could call North City and have them send us a book or two.”

Olivier pursed her lips.

“And how long will that take?”

“A few days. I don’t know. I’ll try and keep you informed.”

Olivier looked at her for a few seconds, wondering how that process of sharing information would go down. Zinnia held her gaze, somehow getting better at this by practicing so much in the past few minutes.

In the end, Olivier just nodded.

“I guess I’ll find you where I always do, then,” she said softly.
Zinnia nodded back at her, “Yes, ma’am.”

*Ma’am… The sheer audacity.* No one had called her ma’am since she’d been underage, but that was water under the bridge now, so Olivier growled to herself but said nothing to the flower girl.

She just walked away… and bid her time.

Chapter End Notes

hjdkdfhrjd I was supposed to have uploaded this yesterday but... I'm stuck on Chapter 14 (writer's block yay), and I feel like maybe I should rewrite everything before that to make it all fit better into the general plot, but I don't know. Maybe I'll do that when the whole's fic done and keep posting weekly for now
When writing grew stale, Zinnia fought it, but not for long. She just left it all under the spring sun, so it would charge itself back, so it would decide it was too hot to remain there and it’d try and find her again.

A writer without words… That felt like the world’s most ironic of realities. How could she run out? She lived surrounded by them, made sure to drown herself in more after work, and wrote them by the hundreds in her free time, whether it was by the corner that was already hers through stubbornness or at home. How could they abandon her like that with no warning?

One day she’d just knocked on their door and nobody had come open it for her to invite her in. Was Zinnia not allowed in anymore?

“Try something else,” Anthony told her. Anthony was not a writer. He worked around electricity, the energy that moved him was different. He liked challenges that someone else could help him with if he failed to solve them. He didn’t understand that something else wouldn’t fill the hole, or even begin to repair it.

“’Something else’ as in draping my neck over the edge of my bed and think of stuff or something else as in—?”

“’Something else’ as in, I don’t know, Zin.” She startled a little at the harshness of his tone. It was true sometimes she sought all the answers in him, assuming he had them when he probably didn’t even have his own to begin with. She felt kind of bad for always monopolizing everything with him. “Draw, buy ten pears and eat them, go see if the town’s butchery is any good. That kinda stuff.”

She understood. “Distraction.”

“Yeah, it’s either—” He seemed to be really thinking about this, too. Even when he was disinterested or tired of her same-old bullshit, he rummaged his brains for something to say. “—being demotivated yet determined to write even if it’s bad, or going out there and finding out your reason to keep going till it’s good.”

Zinnia almost laughed. “Is that what you do?” Did he turn the switches on and off when nothing seemed to work? Did their entire town lose electricity when he did?

“I do a lot of stuff. Unsure about which stuff in particular you mean.”

“Distract yourself from something till you just… know how to get back to it?”

“I just do what I feel I should. Sometimes I fuck it up even more, but that’s life. Do the same. Fuck up. It’s good for one’s ego.” He said it exactly in the opposite spirit of ‘it’s good for one’s ego’. Fucking up was not nice, even if it helped get some perspective. People looked at you differently, their judgment clear in their eyes, and no amount of well-deserved redemption from your mistakes made them forget about it.

That’s why Zinnia stayed mostly quiet, unless pushed too far; aside to protect herself from foreign opinions; vigilant so she could avoid as many fuck-ups as she could.
“I don’t know how to do that.” She laughed at her own absurdity because she really didn’t know. She always tried to do the opposite of what he was saying. Her entire stay in the north was rooted in trying not to fuck up, in walking on eggshells so things that could go wrong only went wrong a little and not completely. Some eggshells had already cracked, though. “Fucking up is terrible, Anthony.”

“Is it?” Anthony said, clearly in disagreement. “You learn. We all need a good dose of that sometimes. God knows I did…” he muttered.

“You have learned,” she rebuked. “So have I.”

“I miss you, though.” And Zinnia knew that what he meant wasn’t ‘hey I haven’t seen you in a while’, it went deeper than that. He hadn’t used his funny voice.

He missed things she couldn’t give back to him. Things that had been, a long time ago, and that she knew had hurt him, and would continue to do so. Because some wounds didn’t heal all the way, there remained some pain in the new skin around it.

“Can’t unlearn that.”

“Don’t, then,” Zinnia said after a few seconds. “You don’t have to. You have me.”

He just sighed in the end, because he missed the old Zinnia, not the woman talking to him right now, and that younger version of her was never coming back. “Anyway, move your ass. Even if you’re not writing, do something. You’ll feel more productive.”

“I’ll do that if you tell me why you sound like someone poured salt into your glass of water,” she said. She was certain there was something bothering him. In other circumstances she might’ve not pressed it, but he was being too good helping her with her bullshit, she wanted to let him know he wasn’t alone either. “And don’t tell me it’s because you miss me.”

“…my love life’s as consistent as a fried egg,” he finally admitted in low voice.

“What happened?” she asked, biting her lip.

“There’s been this girl, lately. She said she doesn’t feel the same way.”

“I’m sorry, Anthony…”

“Don’t be. I just—I’m scared she won’t want to be friends. People don’t always want to be friends, after…”

Zinnia tried not to take that the wrong way. Sometimes he made small references to their failed story and then the slapdash friendship that’d been coined out of it. She’d gotten over it pretty fast, getting lost in another pair of beautiful eyes, but he hadn’t.

“If she doesn’t, well, that’s her choice to make,” she told him. Just like it was mine to continue to be, with you. “And you’ll make more friends.”

“She’s… not acting different. But she’s… I don’t know, distant?”

Zinnia thought about it. What would she do if she was trying to be friendly to someone who kept building walls between them? She didn’t really have to imagine it, though, did she?

“Then relax, give it time. Give yourself time. You’ll know if she’s not interested in keeping you around. But don’t just listen to paranoid Anthony, okay? Listen to normal Anthony as well. He
knows stuff. His advice is always sound, huh? So follow it too."

She bit her lip and held her breath. If he found out she was definitely not following her own advice and, on top of that, recycled it for his needs…

“I don’t wanna hurt her, Zin,” he muttered.

“Then be a friend to her and listen to her too.”

“I’m gonna fuck it up, aren’t I?”

She actually chuckled, louder than she’d meant to. But it was too good not to.

“Do you want me to spit your own line back at you?” she said. “Because I could.”

“No, I want you to get the hell out of your living room and do something different with your life,” Anthony replied at once. “And I’ll… try and not freak out too much. Whoever breaks form first loses.”

Zinnia did laugh now. He was back.

“Good. And relax a little, okay?”

Even if she’d semi-promised she’d behave, Zinnia put off the going out and doing things part. It was Saturday, and she had no work. She could’ve gone to the bookshop anyway, Candie really didn’t mind it, and she’d probably get paid anyway. But she didn’t want to. She wanted to feel young for once, do something young people did.

In Iver there was a tiny group of teenagers who sat cross-legged near the main street and just about told funny stories and laughed loudly, like the teenagers they were.

But when she did her version of the same thing and sat down somewhere quiet, the authority came to get her, ogling her with angry eyes and making her feel like she had huge spot on her favorite dress.

The last good words she’d written, crumbled beyond redemption in one of her light jackets, were precisely for the person who had poured dark liquid to make that huge spot all the more visible.

She comes to destroy. Every day, every afternoon. With her fearlessness and her authority, and her words. If she spoke, it was settled. You had no further say, even if you dared to speak up. Except… except sometimes she wavers. But it’s so subtle, sometimes I think I’m making it up.

Zinnia hadn’t allowed herself to hand that in with her usual smile. She’d written more words for Olivier Armstrong than she’d written for herself, now. And they were confident words, at that. They were defiant, nothing like her usual blabber. These paragraphs of hers, born in the north for the north, gave off more confidence than anything she’d even written before.

She couldn’t always live by that poise, but her words could. And those were an immortal sample of the things she meant to be yet never got to.

The situation, of course, continued to be tense. Something in Zinnia stirred uncomfortably when she saw the tall woman appear in the sun, but she’d learned to swallow it, keep it hidden inside her. Perhaps that’s what kept the general coming here, the fact that she hadn’t managed to scare Zinnia off yet. Or maybe now she came because she simply needed something from here and it gave her pleasure to torture the new girl with her presence.
And Zinnia couldn’t afford to think it was her words that attracted the general, although she didn’t stop writing short paragraphs that didn’t really praise Olivier, just… ached to understand her.

Whenever Zinnia’s hands brushed hers to give her the piece of paper, the Northern Wall of Briggs left to never return until the next midafternoon. Zinnia’s words were a ceasefire. A temporary one.

And every time this encounter took place lately, there were words exchanged, but nothing like the first days of spring. This was business, polite and aloof, but civil. Olivier asked a few times, short and to the point, and every time Zinnia had to tell her there was nothing yet. North City was close enough that a book wouldn’t take too long to travel, but they’d still have to look for it.

One day, after Zinnia had willingly given Olivier one of the most ridiculously risky things she’d written—a sound analysis of her role in the military, as if Zinnia knew a lot about that other than what the men had taken to say—, when the question came Zinnia had a different answer.

“It came in this morning. I’d asked for more but it’s already remarkable that they found any.” Zinnia looked up at the general’s blue eyes. “Will it do?”

“It’ll be worth your trouble, yes,” she said at once, arms crossed tightly over her chest. Zinnia ogled, thinking that must be pretty uncomfortable, to be all constricted in a uniform and then constrict yourself even more by reducing space like that.

She quickly recovered, though, as if she’d never lain her eyes anywhere she shouldn’t.

“Oh it was no trouble, it’s my job. Do you want me to bring it to you tomorrow?”

Olivier thought about it for a second.

“Now would be more fitting,” she said. “I’ve waited long enough.”

Zinnia stood up at once, as if she’d been given an order, taking her straw hat and putting it on. The spring sun could still burn.

“Sure.” She began to lead the way into the narrow streets of Iver, although Olivier would have surely known how to get there on her own. It made sense to walk together, in any case. They were, absurd as it felt, going to the same place.

The general’s stride covered vastly more inches than her own, it made her have to walk faster so they’d be even. Should she even walk at the same level as a general? Was there any sort of protocol she wasn’t following? If there was, Olivier didn’t once speak about it with her usual annoyance.

“I hope Candie’s still there, or you will have to wait until tomorrow. I don’t have a key,” Zinnia said when they were nearing the bookshop.

Their footsteps merged into one against the pavement and eventually gravel. Once there, they got lucky. Candie was in, and busied herself with something at the counter, letting her associate take care of this. Zinnia almost smiled. Candie was probably a little too scared to meddle with Olivier Armstrong—who wasn’t?

At the back of the shop, Zinnia got the big dusty book from the shipping box it’d come in and offered it to the other woman, arms shaking slightly under its weight.

“There you go.” Nervously, Zinnia dared to look at her again. “Looks … dense.”

“It is.” Olivier wasn’t paying attention to her, though. Her eyes were on the cover, and the trembling
fingers holding it for her to see. “Not that you would know why, would you?” She’d spoken so softly, Zinnia hesitated about whether it’d actually meant to be hurtful, more like… bitter. Because it was not like Olivier knew a lot about it either, she wouldn’t be interested in reading about it if she did.

“God no.” Zinnia decided not to act offended by that accusation. “That sort of thing is too out of my reach, I’m afraid. It’s all dense to me. I was just … making conversation.”

This time, when her eyes sought the general’s, they found them. Like falling upwards onto the night sky… Their blue was warm and weirdly inviting, so contrary to the aura surrounding her. Nothing in the woman seemed so, she was fortified against invaders and passersby.

Olivier didn’t look away. In fact, she stared far longer than she wanted to. Zinnia’s brown skin attracted her gaze; she irradiated a kind of energy that wasn’t typical of these lands. She … irradiated kindness, even if it was misplaced.

But Zinnia didn’t feel especially kind right now, she actually wondered if this was an invasion or sorts, if letting her eyes dart further down at the covered pale neck of the woman in front of her counted as an act of war. How many soldiers were dying in the trenches just because she’d decided she wanted to conquer this?

“Ask North City for more books,” Olivier barked all of a sudden, stripping Zinnia’s hands of the heavy book with a hard tug. “There’s bound to be more theory on this than there is here.”

But in North City, at least, there wasn’t any more. Zinnia had asked for all the information available under the term ‘alkahestry’, even ‘alchemy’, but only one book had come through.

What was she to do? Maybe she could ask lower regions. This couldn’t be all the data there was in all of Amestris. There was always someone who had travelled through Xing, someone who had learned from someone else.

She couldn’t let Olivier know that she was expanding her area of research, though. That would be as dangerous as admitting she hadn’t disliked making eye contact with her, walking alongside with her, being an adult around her.

“It’ll take a while, but okay,” she finally said. “I’ll bring it them to you as they come, so you won’t have to postpone your business in town.”

Olivier almost grunted. What business in town does this idiot think I could possibly have?

“I think I’m more than capable of finding my own way back here,” she commented.

Zinnia laughed. “Never doubted that, General. Shall I walk you to the door now?” Her brown eyes shone inquisitively at Olivier in… a proposition, perhaps? Or just… politeness. That burning, icy politeness. Olivier wished the girl would just treat her coldly all the time, ruthlessly. She didn’t want any of this kindness, even if she could grow to admire it.

Kindness was weakness.

“No,” she said at once, heart lurching up to her throat. Invader…, she thought. But her face was a perfect mask and it denoted no emotion that Zinnia could misinterpret.

Olivier read the confusion in her eyes. Good… She walked away promptly. Her business here was completed.
“Okay, then. Have a good day,” came the confused voice of Zinnia.

One foot already out of Candie’s bookshop, Olivier couldn’t help it. She muttered to herself:

“Likewise.”

She made sure to call when Candie had gone get them both lunch. It’d only take a few minutes, but she’d already found the phone number in one of the many wrinkly pieces of paper strewn over the counter. Candie had an old rusty phone at the back, right on her tiny desk. Zinnia wasn’t very sure it worked, but it was connected to the main line, so in theory it had to.

The voice that answered sounded a little off, shaky, but still perfectly understandable.

“Um, hi,” Zinnia stuttered. “Central Library?”

“Yes. How can I help?”

“I was wondering, do you have any books concerning alkahestry?”

“I’m not familiar with the term.”

“I’ll spell it.” Zinnia did and patiently waited a few seconds for the other person to note it down. “Anything will do, really. I’ve found it’s a hard topic to find books about.”

“I’ll look through our main records and someone will give you a call in a few days.”

Zinnia made sure they wrote down the number so they could call her to her house phone instead (just in case), and thanked them kindly. And then she just resigned to wait.

She was going to have to eventually ask Candie if this was something she condoned. Maybe she’d never ordered books south of North City. Maybe she didn’t want to. Candie might have loved her little place, but Zinnia was not sure she loved putting too much effort into it. No one usually asked her to.

When Central Library called her again, Zinnia was wrapped up in a thin blanket, huddled in the corner of her couch—she hugged her knees when she picked the phone up.

“There’s a few entries listed in the records,” they told her. “But… it appears that we currently don’t have access to them.”

“What does that mean?” Nothing good, Zinnia thought.

After a brief moment of silence, came the answer:

“They’ve been registered in Central libraries, but their current location and status are unknown.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m currently about ten chapters ahead and I can only say I am truly delighted with this project, and I hope the story gets a little more interesting to read from here on (I did a
reread last weekend and laughed at my own in-story jokes, 'nuff said)
Getting interrupted by something important while doing something equally important was basically her job title at this point. She’d been reading long enough that the words began to blur in her mind as she tried to recall them; a little change of scenery would be welcome. She could return to alkahestry later. Leaving the book in one of her drawers, she waited for the knock on the door to become an actual person.

The Mountain Men had returned, so her soldier informed. Buccaneer had requested her presence downstairs with those that had come back. Miles came down with her, as he’d have to pitch this in in the several schedules of the fort, and rotate several turns for the men who’d come back home.

It was routine. All the news they brought was strange sightings in the dirt, markings of what looked like old spells—dark magic. Olivier smiled to herself, the scant and entirely biased history Amestris had concocted about their neighbor Drachma spoke of occasional meddlings with forces greater than a normal human’s.

Back when she’d been no one in this place, she might have believed them. Now, and especially after having informed herself on certain topics, she didn’t believe it was magic anymore. Those might just be the marks of alchemy, of long gone times, and perhaps even related to the healing abilities of alkahestry.

“Major Miles,” she told him, “there’s a book on my desk that might clear some facts. Go get it.”

He nodded and immediately left.

The border held, or so it seemed. Briggs soldiers had been combing the mountains for infiltrators during much of the last decade or so, and so far it still remained more as a preemptive measure than as a way to stop a real threat, at least since Buccaneer’s incident.

Sometimes, perched on the top of the wall, Miles and his fellow men would see smoke marring the horizon and the dew-covered sunlight, but the army Briggs expected to find at their doors one morning never came.

Whatever Drachma was planning, Briggs had no starting point to try and get one step ahead of them. Just trial and error, and working past their normal hours to find a crack in Drachma’s impenetrable armor, and Olivier’s unbreakable command.

Miles didn’t think it wise to intervene, unless she asked. Briggs was known for its unwavering defense protocols, wouldn’t hesitate to bring their own army down on Drachma’s head if necessary, but alchemy was for the dogs at Central. Alchemy was the spark that’d burned Miles’ family’s land to the ground. Studying what could be a tiny clue of something long past didn’t seem, to him, the best way to gain military knowledge on their enemy now.
But Miles knew to obey.

He opened the door to the general’s office and closed it carefully so it wouldn’t slam. *The desk, she’d said?* It was, as per usual, a mess. People to send back south, people to receive, new plans for the tanks, acquisitions of new weaponry from the east… And all that paperwork went through one single woman. Daily.

But he saw no book here. Perhaps she’d left it in her drawers… Miles didn’t think it twice, although he for one didn’t feel comfortable going off route. A few neatly-folded pieces of paper met his eyes, clearly not the book. He could’ve well moved on to the next drawer, yet he didn’t. These didn’t seem reports or files or anything work-related. Plus, the handwriting wasn’t as neat as that stuff usually was.

His eyes immediately fell drawn to the first lines.

*What is her purpose here, I wonder? A woman standing tall atop a wall, finally come to walk amongst her so-called equals. She walks and she sees, perhaps even observes us. But is she of this place like I might one day be? Does she know that I am not? Does she hope to put us all behind bars if the north still hasn’t decided to adopt us, to coat our hearts in the same unsavory frost hers has always been bathed in?*

It was clear who those words were describing. Miles reread it all of three times trying to understand why this had been written, and who was its author. And most importantly, why on earth would Olivier Armstrong keep anything like this, so nicely preserved, in her personal drawers?

Almost entirely overtaken by curiosity, Miles left that piece of paper back in the drawer and took another one in his roughened hands. And another. And another.

When he finally found the book he’d been sent there to find, he closed all drawers and took it down to the general. But he couldn’t, when he met her blue eyes, hide a small and gentle smile that he knew she wouldn’t understand or imagine anything of.

Olivier kept herself in those drawers—but she did so in someone else’s words. And there were so few reasons why she might do that. She’d once kept an entire album of newspaper headlines about her, calling her names, criticizing her for her post, for her trajectory.

Truth be told, though, it didn’t strike Miles as if that was the case now.

The men had replicated a few of the carvings—rudimentary, nothing like what Olivier knew a true alchemist could create—on bark from the mountain trees for her to see. None of them were knowledgeable enough about the discipline to be able to tell that those were *unfinished* transmutation circles.

“What do you recognize these, sir?” Buccaneer had asked Olivier.

All the general could say about these was that the marks in them could never belong to any other discipline.

“They’re familiar in shape,” she said. The circle, the pentagrams inside it… Her men had said that the original circles they’d found were scratched permanently on a particularly dry patch of dirt. “It might be a case of simple alchemy, rather than something more elaborate.” She didn’t feel confident enough on the finding to be conclusive. “In any case, what you describe seems to be old. Very old. It
won’t be of use to us now.”

Buccaneer frowned, his entire face wrinkling up in a grimace. He probably expected those marks to factor somehow in Briggs’ plan against Drachma, or at least shed some light on what the enemy had in mind.

“What do you propose we do?” he asked.

“We’ll keep sending men out,” Olivier said, matching his frown, “until something solid comes out of it. Or until nothing does.” She glanced at Miles’ perfectly neutral stance by her side. She knew he didn’t think ‘nothing’ was ever Drachma’s plan, just like it wasn’t theirs. She agreed. “And let’s hope nothing does,” she added, though. That way, either it would be confirmed that the Drachman had become cowardly idiots since their last attack or that Briggs’ strategy could finally move on to something different. Perhaps even incursions on foreign land. “That’s all for now. You may leave.”

The last batch of Mountain Men saluted her and took the elevator to their respective bunks. They wouldn’t be on mountain duty again for a long while. Olivier hoped that would bring comfort to them, fully aware that it would certainly not bring her that.

“The next batch will be ready to depart in the morning,” Buccaneer announced, crossing her arms tightly over his chest as well as the metal automail allowed.

Olivier nodded. She motioned for Miles to hand her over the book she’d asked for. Miles’ arms thanked her for it, its weight more bothersome after a while, but her hands were perfectly still as she held it up to check something. Confirmation on the shape of the circles, perhaps.

“I’d like your say on something,” she said. Both men came closer to take a look, although what she wanted their opinion on wasn’t explicitly mentioned on those pages. “This covers the basics. Barely. As far as I know, any person instructed in it can learn alchemy.” She paused for effect. “But is it the same for alkahestry? Would anybody be able to learn? Would an alchemist?”

“Wasn’t your brother an alchemist?” Buccaneer asked with a mischievous grin.

The general’s dislike for her younger sibling was not news to veteran Briggs soldiers. Especially not the captain.

As expected, Olivier glared at him, almost growled: “A state alchemist,” she said. “Do I need to remind you why Briggs will never house one of them?” She shot one quick look to Miles, who remained motionless. “Perhaps Major Miles would like to explain to you why?”

A region reduced to ashes, its population scattered to the winds, not allowed to remain on Amestrian grounds as far as the military was concerned. Olivier didn’t respect what had been done there, nor he who had given the order for giving it, but she wouldn’t extend any kindness to her brother for refusing to do his duty there either. Instead, now he had to atone for the evils of Ishval and his desertion both. At least the soldiers Olivier knew from Eastern Command would only torture themselves for Ishval, never for both having committed atrocities there and having been defeated by themselves while committing them.

“I’m sure he’ll be interested in helping us, anyway...” Buccaneer muttered. To anybody else it might look curious to see a seven-foot tall man of sixty years looking away from a commanding officer in fear—and a commanding officer he’d once teased when he’d been a higher rank than her—but Miles merely held back a smile.

Olivier shook her head, trying to stay focused.
“This doesn’t concern the likes of him.”

Then, Miles’ eyes opened wide, “Sir, alkahestry is of Xingese origin, isn’t it?”

Olivier nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“Then all of our questions could be answered by someone from Xing,” he said.

Inevitably, the mention of the country, far east beyond their borders, brought some memories back. Of the titanic magnolia’s tree under which Olivier had used to study for her exams on military history as Ianthe read up on Amestrian flora like one would seek stories about valiant heroes saving the world. Ianthe knew every flower, every tree, every bush on Amestrian territory. To her there’d been no south, no north, no east nor west. Just the heliantheae in the dry grassland, dianthus defying the winter frost, the dandelions near the desert, and cowslips in the damper soils. She knew their names, and the scientific terms they went by. But Ianthe had loved magnolias the most, a flower of cultural significance for her kin across the desert. Of Xingese descent, Ianthe’s family had been established for two generations in Amestris by the time Olivier had met her.

If Olivier could get back in touch with her now, would Ianthe know the intricate details of a force she’d once spoken of as a flow of living energy? And even so, even if Ianthe knew the answers to Olivier’s questions—wherever she was now—, nothing guaranteed a soldier from Briggs could learn alkahestry.

Olivier still remembered Ianthe’s address. But nobody here knew a word of that past life of hers. She couldn’t just bleed openly for everyone to see, unbury it all for the sake of just one of her many alternatives to outsmarting Drachma.

Major Miles continued explaining what he’d thought out, unaware that his general had been miles and miles away for a second.

“Or perhaps an operation past the desert would be in our best interest, since Drachma still appears to be dormant enough for now.”

Olivier calculated at once the cost of such a mission, the risks she’d be taking if that was Drachma’s way of weakening her fort’s defenses, having them cross the desert in search for answers to something that had only been a trap. Briggs might fall, then, and Olivier could not—would not—let that happen while she was still standing.

She’d find another way to make alkahestry work. She was still waiting on news from the flower girl in the bookshop, after all. But she didn’t tell her adjutants that much.

“We won’t invest so much in such an unelaborate plan. But,” she said markedly, “I might be able to get my hands on more detailed information soon.”

She hadn’t asked so far, because she’d assumed there’d been nothing to tell. But now, looking at the disaster of a woman chasing after dozens of sheets of paper that’d been blown away by the wind, ice-cream in hand, Olivier wasn’t so sure she’d made the right decision in not asking more often. As always, she’d have to just demand what she wanted, or... hint very heavily at the fact that she expected, at the very least, regular updates.

In the shade, Zinnia had barely managed to stomp on the last of her stray sheets, out of breath, when Olivier approached her, boots thumping loudly on the ground.
“Have you received note of any of the books I asked for?” she asked.

“Actually,” Zinnia said, blushing. She still found it very very hard to look at the general in the eye. It was like popping an ice cube in your mouth. “I called several places, like you asked.” You’re such a filthy liar, Zin, she told herself, trying not to blush harder. She’d called one place, the best place one could go to for books, and they’d had nothing, so no other place ever would. But having demonstrated clear interest in Olivier’s odd quest wasn’t something Zinnia wanted to make public. “All they’ve been able to tell me is that those books have—” She lowered her gaze even more, as if expecting a reprimand. “—disappeared.”

“Books don’t just disappear,” Olivier scowled.

“No, I know. I just didn’t know how else to explain it briefly. I know you must be very busy.”

Now it was time for Olivier to blush. She hoped to death the girl would attribute it to frustration.

“Quit appealing to how ‘busy’ I’m supposed to be and explain,” she said, bluntly. “However detailedly as you see fit.”

Zinnia gulped, nodded, and started to talk.

She told it all and she told it true, word for word as it’d been told to her, not cutting down on her own opinions on it. General Armstrong might be generally unpleasant to speak to, for diverse reasons, but still Zinnia didn’t wish her a long and useless frantic search for something that everybody hadn’t kept tags on for years.

Still, if Olivier wanted to waste time and resources taking the same calls Zinnia had, she was welcome to. Zinnia wouldn’t involve herself any further.

And Olivier did try to find more data on her own in the following days and weeks, convinced this lack of information couldn’t be entirely objective, owing in part to the flower girl’s incompetence. But Olivier kept hitting wall after wall, and eventually had no choice but to admit she’d arrived to the same conclusion Zinnia had: there were indeed no books on alkahestry left in Amestris that anybody could physically find.

Curious. All the more curious...

Chapter End Notes

**Bit of trivia because I love it:** According to Wikipedia, the heliantheae is actually the tribe of the zinnia flower. Incidentally it contains Ianthe’s name and I literally found out about this yesterday while revising my manuscripts and I laughed out loud because it’s too good to be true.

Also, another discovery of mine is that there's actually a character named Zinnie in Pokemon, which is something I feel I should've known before
When the finish line keeps moving

Chapter Notes

“I don’t think you’re leaving. I think you’re running. And what I can’t figure out is, are you running towards something you want? Or are you running from something you’re afraid to want?” —Maid In Manhattan (2002)

The only truly quiet place on the never stopping organized chaos of Briggs just had to be the corridor on which Olivier’s office was. You could just sit there, waiting for an opening to go talk to her, and might as well get lost in the routine of the soldiers walking by. Nobody gathered here, everybody came and went in perfect order, knowing where they had to be and why.

Buccaneer and Miles had been sitting outside of the office for a while now. Buccaneer had come half an hour before, at the break of dawn, ready to bring his half-request half-complaint to the general only to find Miles already waiting for her there. He’d told him she was probably queuing for the showers—they were quite busy at this hour. Briggs was an ongoing forge of activity all night long as well, but most things still followed a normal, typical morning schedule. Miles was in charge of it being so. He was extraordinarily good at making these little things work, he was the person who wound the clock this fort was.

The two men had yawned a few times in each other’s company, ready to fall asleep against the rough gray wall if Olivier didn’t arrive to work soon, when they’d started going through the recent gossip. About the newbies adapting slowly (Austin had finally learned to mingle without acting like a Central soldier all the time), about the few romances springing just as the flowers reached their full bloom, and finally, after biting his tongue for nearly twenty minutes, Miles had told Buccaneer about… the letters.

“So, what would you say they are? Love letters?” Buccaneer said, once Miles had caught him up with the news, quotes included. The amusement in his voice was almost a tangible thing.

“Well, they’re not love letters exactly.” Miles replied. He was sure Buccaneer would’ve loved for them to be so, they’d be able to quietly laugh about it all for months. But, he supposed, the mystery around this little discovery would also be interesting to unveil, or to try to, anyway. Whatever reasons Olivier had for doing things, most of the time that wasn’t information privy to them.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Buccaneer laughed merrily, clearly in disagreement.

There were many types of love letters, and just because these didn’t have hearts over the ‘i’s and overcomplicated figures of speech didn’t mean the person writing them hadn’t tried to convey something not even the best poets had managed to pin down to a satisfactory description.

Miles opened his mouth in the shape of an ‘o’ when he realized what Buccaneer meant with his little amused face. “Someone from the fort?”

To his surprise, Buccaneer shook his head.

“The general might care for everybody on this base, Miles, just like we all care about her. But think
Close, in this case, was meant literally. The only people who spent more than a fleeting moment discussing matters with her were her right-hand man and the man without a right hand.

“We’re not her friends. No one here is her friend,” Miles pointed out. “She can’t afford to have them.”

“Exactly.” Buccaneer said. “It has to be someone from the outside, someone she can’t order about.”

Miles snorted. “So you’re saying someone under her command can’t fall in love with her?”

Half her troops might as well have been in love with her at some point, she inspired as much fear as she did infatuation. He himself had used to think he was, until she’d caught him blushing at something she’d said and had only proceeded to yell louder until it had gotten through to Miles’ head that there would be no way, ever, that Olivier Armstrong would even so much as look at her soldiers that way. Although it was true that nobody really knew the real reason for that.

Buccaneer only grinned back at Miles with wise innocence.

“Power dynamics, my friend,” he concluded. “It would never work out without things having to change a lot. I personally don’t see that happening.”

Miles didn’t either, to be honest. Everybody here might’ve taken one curious look at her as a possible partner at some time, but they all ended up burying their heads in work in the end. This was what mattered when one lived and worked at Briggs: the work itself. And she who guided them through it was just as involved in that one shared goal.

“I suppose you’re right…” he just said.

But who could it be, then? Who could’ve taken a look at their fierce general and decided to write about the image she gave to the world and the woman—realer, mysterious, capable of breaking—that lay beneath the surface?

Miles sighed. Both he and Buccaneer remained quiet for a couple of minutes. Neither of them had any answers. They’d just wanted to gossip a little, laugh at how impossible it was to find love in this place, especially for Olivier. But now they were both worried, weren’t they?

Then Buccaneer slowly leaned towards Miles and said:

“And are you sure I can’t just take a quick look? It’ll clear things up. My say will be conclusive.”

Miles practically face-palmed at that. “I shouldn’t have told you, should I?”

He didn’t even know why he bothered. These men liked gossip more than he himself did, and that was saying something—catching up to the current news in the fort was one of Miles’ favorite pastimes. The range of activities one could do for leisure remained… scarce, to this day.

“Well, we’re friends, Miles. Yes, you should’ve.”

Miles punched him hard in the arm that wasn’t made of metal.

“Stop laughing,” he hissed. “She’s going to kill me for even telling you this much…”

First, Buccaneer gave a quick, low chuckle, but then he supported his huge head on his hand, elbow on knee, looking too pensive for his usual type. Miles really shouldn’t have told him.
“Why would she keep them, though?” Buccaneer asked. “Is it some kind of pride thing, like with the newspapers?”

“That kind of thing empowered her. I don’t think this in particular would.”

“Why not? If she found strength in insults, she could easily—”

“It’s different. These paragraphs, basically, what they do is more or less bare her to the naked eye. The eye of the writer, in this case—”

Judging by Buccaneer’s paling expression and his widely opened eyes, Miles knew how to shut up in the precise moment Olivier herself walked past them, key in hand to get into her own office.

Without a curt ‘good morning’ first, she just nodded at them as a greeting.

“If you’re talking about naked people,” she said, “this is definitely not the place.”

She didn’t look particularly bothered by it. In her younger days, she’d usually join Buccaneer in the obscene talk after work. But now she had to bite her tongue a little more than he did. Someone had to set the example for how much bullshit would be allowed.

“Sorry, boss.” Buccaneer quickly said.

She almost smiled. Her Captain was the only person here she would allow to call her ‘boss’, she’d send almost anybody else to a cell if they did the same thing, which most knew not to do, with the glorious exception of the youngest members of the Briggs crew. It always brought a few good-natured laughs to see them follow Buccaneer’s example and have that grant them punishment.

“I had a request to make,” Buccaneer continued, standing up alongside Miles and following Olivier into the office. “Miles was only keeping me company.”

She turned to the major:

“What will you be able to work with both of us here?”

Miles shook his head slowly.

“No problem, sir.”

The tenuous sunlight at this hour filtered through the bookshop’s windows onto the counter. Zinnia sat there, knees crossed, one elbow on the counter and her other hand turning pages in the most absolute tedium.

An obsolete set of roads and paths connect the towns north of North City, leading back there where trains will be available to travel anywhere south, but what of the Briggs mountains? Are there any paths that go through them? What were they used for before the Drachman conflict? Are they still used now?

“Whatcha reading there?” Candie’s voice interrupted Zinnia’s—bleak as it was—train of thought.

Zinnia immediately closed the book and left it on the counter, as if it wasn’t hers and she had no connection to it whatsoever. Which made no sense at all, why would she want to feign disconnection to something as silly as this? Nothing could be made out of it without context, and Zinnia herself was
the only one that had context, didn’t she?

Well, maybe every other neighbor who’d seen her sitting in the sun day in and day out might also have an idea… But then again, maybe everybody would think she was just interested in the area she currently lived in. That was a normal thing in her, getting curious about things in general.

*Yes, general... that’s the key word here. General.*

“Oh nothing,” she quickly said, though. “Paths in the mountains and all that.”

“Why would you read *that*?” Candie chuckled.

“I got no work this morning. Nobody’s come in yet.”

Candie smirked at her, sitting on the stool next to Zinnia’s, “Hasn’t General Armstrong come down today?”

Zinnia opened her eyes wide. That was hell of a specific question. Very specific, tremendously specific and not at all expected, although maybe she should’ve expected it, prepared for it somehow.

Had there been any announcements made to the town? Did the entirety of Iver know now that the Ice Queen came to *this* bookstore in particular and talked to *this* particular southern girl about the books she so sorely needed?

They might as well do now that Candie had mentioned it.

“N-no, why would she?” Zinnia stuttered, pretending to be fine and cool and all of those things that she obviously was not. “I already, um, got her what she needed a few days ago.”

Zinnia looked away. What she’d needed and *more*. Zinnia had let her good faith take over and she’d made many calls to many different libraries and booksellers over the entire country. If Candie found out about that, she’d grow madly curious too and want to get her hands on the books herself.

Again, why did Zinnia bother with these things? Nobody had asked her to!

“What did she want, anyway?” Candie asked in the end. Zinnia let out all of the air in her lungs, hugely relieved that Candie didn’t know about the…extra hours. “I found it strange she’d come here. Normally she doesn’t leave her fort, but…”

Zinnia answered immediately and in a higher pitch than usual. “Something tactical, I think.”

Candie snorted. “Then no wonder we had none of that here.”

“Nope!” Zinnia said.

There was never anything here, and if there was, it was just a book or two, something to just get started with. Zinnia almost never had to order books from other places. Zinnia almost never had to worry about said books outside of this small bookshop.

And she was never going to do that again, it had been decided. No more going out of her way for something that meant that little and would only grant her grunts in return. It would have been way kinder for Olivier to at least pay her phone bill…

“Good morning!” suddenly said a friendly voice.

Zinnia allowed herself two seconds of hope before she turned her face to the door and saw the
neighbor that made Iver’s strongest coffee. That’d been one of the lessons she’d learned lately: to definitely avoid anything called coffee in this town.

“Sorry to come in like this, but I just heard from Southy that the last book he bought here was a tremendous read. I was wondering if you still had copies?”

For a while, Zinnia watched as the other woman and Candie held a very interesting yet spiraling conversation about remembering book titles as a very useful thing to do when you want people to get a copy for you. After that, Zinnia made a little small talk, about town life. Gossip about the other neighbors, coffee (Why? Zinnia wanted to ask. Why??), and the south. Always the south. As if there wasn’t plenty up north Zinnia would kill to gossip about too.

In the end, and with as little as Candie and Zinnia had to work with, they did find an older copy of the book Southy had bought a few days ago. It was about a cat. Zinnia tried to lose interest as soon as she saw the title. Cats were a touchy subject for her. She merely grabbed it from the shelf and got it to its new owner.

Then, after their neighbor left, happy with her new book under her arm, and she’d said bye, Candie sat in a stool in front of Zinnia again.

“You’ve adapted well, huh?” she commented casually.

“It’s not that big of a change.” Zinnia shrugged.

It had been, but not too dramatically that she’d mull about it for weeks. It’d mainly been an inner struggle, as always. The town had had no problems with her, and they weren’t going to. They thought of her as if she belonged. She did, to them. In her own eyes, Zinnia was still a separate entity from them. From everyone. And certain people hadn’t helped make her feel like Iver was, finally, the place where she’d feel she was allowed to stay and settle.

“Where have you lived before?” Candie asked, probably still curious about her, about a small woman living a life that was far too big for her size. “You mentioned south.”

Zinnia didn’t mean to laugh at that, but she ended up doing so. She might’ve told Candie about that sometime, yes, during the long hours they spent here, mostly without any work to be done. But she didn’t think she’d specified where. Candie probably thought she’d lived a few miles south of North City and nothing more.

To them, Amestris was divided in two: the Briggs mountains and, then, the south.

Such a huge, immeasurable south, Zinnia had used to think. Now, after a few years of living away from home, she thought of Amestris as what it was: a small country where her chances of belonging were thinning the more places she went to live in.

The south hadn’t brought her what she’d expected of it, just like Iver and its beautiful conception of north probably wouldn’t either.

“I lived near the border with Aerugo before coming here,” she finally said.

“You sure like your borders, kid,” Candie said, chuckling. “Is there a reason in particular you’d move from one side of the country to another?”

Zinnia shrugged again. “I thought I could use the contrast.”

“And you plan on keeping on moving, don’t you? Contrast this with something else, something you
“Hope will be better?”

It wasn’t spoken harshly. Candie’s eyes told Zinnia that she saw, that she hadn’t been fooled like everybody else here. Candie saw the marks on Zinnia’s aura that set her apart, even when she was part of this town now, and she didn’t choose to make uncomfortable remarks about it.

Jokes might have been one of Candie’s favorite strings to pull, but she knew when and how. Not now, she’d seen.


“Why? You told me you have a family, didn’t you?”

Zinnia nodded. A prosperous family, friends who called because they missed her and still harbored hopes that she’d return for good one day, ready to resume their friendship like they were still fifteen.

Anthony and her parents had waited for years, and Zinnia knew they still would. Maybe that’s what families did: they waited and waited, even when you’d made it clear that there was nothing to wait for anymore.

“Someone so young, travelling so far... for what?” Candie kept saying. “Just distance? I don’t get it.”

No, she wouldn’t have. If anybody ever had, Zinnia would’ve knelt before them, tearful, and grabbed at the hem of their clothes, begging them to tell her.

“Me neither,” she replied. “I just get tired. Everything feels too familiar one day, and I suddenly can’t stay there anymore.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I guess I just... have no home anywhere.”

Candie frowned. Her face was no longer coated in curiosity or pity, but full understanding, that kind of profound understanding Zinnia pleaded for as much as she was terrified of it.

She gulped, expecting harsh words to come now. She’d just told her current boss that she wasn’t going to stay in Iver for long. She could get fired for this, preemptively. And then Zinnia would be forced to take off earlier, without sufficient money to pay her rent.

The thought, for some reason, made her shiver although it wasn’t chilly these days anymore.

“You know what I think, Zinnia?” Candie said, eyes looking into Zinnia, calmly. Softly, even. It was intended as a kindness rather than the advice Zinnia usually got—always meant to keep her wherever she was at the time, tie her up to that place and make her feel like she was a failure for feeling the need to leave. “I know I don’t know enough about you to really get a say, but if I did, what I’d tell you is that I think you’re running.”

That got Zinnia’s attention. Like a hammer had hit her chest and left her gasping for air.

Running? Was this running? How could it be, she wasn’t being chased by anything she was scared of? She didn’t have any races to win.

“In circles, and back to the same starting point,” Candie continued. And Zinnia gulped over and over; she understood, of course she did, but she didn’t want to. She’d longed for it, for the moment
she’d finally hear these exact words, because she’d needed to hear them. But now that she knew why they were being spoken, and what they entailed, Zinnia refused to let them in.

She understood, of course she did, but she didn’t want to.

“That’s why you get frustrated,” Candie said. Her eyes looked… sad? Mother-like, even. Gentle. Zinnia wanted to wipe the unshed tears away from her boss’s face. “You’re trying to chase something that can’t just be sought. It finds you or it doesn’t, but looking for it won’t make you find it faster.”

Chapter End Notes

me @ me after writing this: subtle much??

yesterday I finished writing the last chapter for this first arc (about 9 chapters ahead), and in retrospective I think the subject of ‘home’ is brought up more often than I’d planned, but I kinda like it
Finally sitting in Olivier’s office, Buccaneer didn’t think twice before he just said what he’d gotten up so early for. It was better not to beat around the bush, especially with her. The less babbling involved, the higher his odds.

“I want to join this morning’s batch,” he said.

Olivier’s response was just as swift and definite.

“No.”

“But sir—”

She tidied up her desk as she spoke, eyes on the sheets of paper she was arranging.

“What made you think my answer had changed since the last time, Captain? You will remain here, where you’re needed,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“With all due respect, if there’s something fishy going on with Drachma, I’ll be of help in the mountains. More than here, sir.”

He showed off his metal arm, as if saying he had no use for it here but could definitely put it to work severing heads if the incursions ever ran into Drachman soldiers.

Olivier shot him a quick look, tired although she had waken up not that long ago.

“How old are you, Buccaneer?”

“Turned sixty this year.” He chuckled, tossing his braid back. He certainly didn’t look his age, and she’d never been one to keep track of that kind of personal information. As long as the people under her performed well, she didn’t care whether they were fresh out of the academy or veterans of a few wars, hence she never paid attention to birth dates.

“Do you know what that means,” she said, “in the military?”

“Should I?” Another chuckle. So he didn’t know, did he?

Did anyone, really? Most died or had to leave before they reached that age. Both she and the captain knew, just as well as Miles did, carefully pretending not to eavesdrop on them.

“Retirement,” Olivier said, answering her own question. “As of the age of sixty-one, you’re eligible to retire.” She paused, trying to paint him the pretty picture that she hardly believed in herself when she pondered about her own withdrawal from the force. “Haven’t you ever given it a thought? A quiet happy life, somewhere warm—”
Buccaneer laughed out loud, histrionically. It was like witnessing an avalanche. That man sure could change the tension in a room for disruptive guffawing about something that didn’t even make that much sense. He himself brought hilarity everywhere.

Not that it mattered now. This was nothing to laugh about. In a year she might have to do without one of her most trusted soldiers, and he’d be left to deal with the civilian world he wasn’t used to anymore. How many years had he been serving at Briggs? Longer than she’d been alive? The shock of that could kill a man, but so could being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Me? Somewhere warm?” He had been born and raised in the north, she knew that much. No wonder he disliked the idea of sun and mild weather. Once you grew used to the tortuous cold of the north, anything warmer became the true torture; one could add layers of clothing in the cold, but in the heat not even full nudity would make you feel less … sweaty. “What the hell would I do there?”

Olivier shrugged.

“Whatsoever you pleased,” she said, mostly because she couldn’t come up with anything more believable at the moment. She, herself, wouldn’t know where to go, when the time came—if the time came. And the thought of going back to the family life she’d made sure to leave behind turned her stomach.

“I’m not retiring.” Buccaneer snapped, finally understanding this was serious. “I got a few more good years left in me, you won’t be getting rid of me that easily.”

But Olivier didn’t bulge one bit.

“You’re under my orders, correct?”

He seemed to hesitate a little, but then said:

“Always.”

“And do you remember how you agreed to follow them all?”

Buccaneer’s face was as red as a poppy flower, so she took it for a yes.

“Good. Because I’m filing you for retirement in a year. I don’t care what you do or where you go, but you’ll do that away from this fort.”

Puzzled, Buccaneer gulped. She could see the fear in his small dark eyes. He’d probably expected a rebuke to his request, nothing more, definitely not word on the fact that he would soon cease to be useful to the military in her eyes.

“Sir,” he said, his voice low, “if this is some sort of punishment, I can assure you, I—”

Softly, sadly, she spoke:

“It’s not, Captain.”

“Then why?” He looked truly heartbroken, deflated. “I come here requesting permission to join a mission, and you spring this on me without warning.”

Like you’re a child to me and I’m twenty years your senior… It feels that way yes, she thought. But I’m doing what you used to. Nothing more.

Olivier looked at him. She could lie, say something generic about following the rules or keeping her
promise to keep him alive, then send him on his way, and he would simply grunt to himself and do as he was told. But she didn’t want him to leave this room without at least getting an idea—distorted as it might be—that she wasn’t imposing this on him as any sort of torment.

“I want you—and everybody else—safe,” Olivier said. “For now, you’re safer on Briggs than out there in the mountains, so that’s where I’m keeping you.” She pierced his eyes with hers. “But there will come a time when you will be safer out in the world as a civilian, and make no mistake, soldier, that’s where I’ll send you when the time is right.”

“I don’t understand,” Buccaneer muttered.

Olivier bit back a soft smile. But she was not soft. She was the North Star, guiding the way north, relentless, unmoved. Cold. He needed her to be that person now, and then one day he would go back to this moment and finally comprehend the reasons behind her severity.

“I don’t expect you to understand, I expect you to obey,” she said, merciless as they all knew her to be. She didn’t add the thought that came to mind as soon as she was done speaking, she didn’t tell him she also expected him to stay alive. “Can you do that or can you not?”

Buccaneer held her gaze for thirty seconds, sure, she thought, that if he kept going she’d get off her high horse and agree to his request.

Stop fighting me, Captain, she thought. Stop fighting and surrender.

Finally, after a long exhale, he did:

“Yes, sir.”

She returned her gaze to the paperwork she’d been arranging without a second thought.

“Good,” she said. “Now get the hell out.”

She flinched when Buccaneer slammed the door behind him, but not because of the noise. Miles cleared his throat at his desk next to hers, and she was sure he was about to say something about what he’d just heard, so she steered clear of his red eyes and avoided confrontation.

She didn’t need him to tell her what she already knew.

“So where will you go next?” Candie asked in the end, when she finally accepted that Zinnia wasn’t going to reply to what she’d said earlier about running.

For a moment, the younger woman thought about it. About the options she had and how fast they’d run out if she kept clinging to them instead of living the moment.

“I don’t know yet. Maybe I’ll stay in the north.” She did like how quiet it was, how nice the people were. Some other places she’d seen were a thousand times more beautiful, but the townspeople were… not this hospitable.

“But not here,” Candie pointed out.

“But not here,” Zinnia confirmed with a nod.

‘Here’ was temporary. This country, most likely, was just temporary. These people, this life… She
was running, wasn’t she? But was she running from the past licking at her heels or was she sprinting to be the first who crossed the finish line?

Anthony, Dew, her mother, her father, her childhood friends… did they have staying power? Did the neat, unimaginable future have the capacity to tug harder at her? Hadn’t that been the case for the past years?

“Well…” Candie said, getting closer to her to kiss her forehead, gently. Her hand brushed away Zinnia’s grown-out bangs. “I hope you do find your home, little flower.”

Zinnia wrinkled her nose.

“Just because my parents went and saw a pretty flower to name me after doesn’t mean I like the wretched things…” she grumbled.

Candie laughed softly and then sighed. She took one good look at Zinnia before she moved her hands away from her face.

“Go home, come on,” she said, although it was still early. “You’re done for the day.”

It was funny, how the concept of home was used in conversation, thrown into it like it meant nothing more than a collection of walls and furniture where one was safe enough to sleep.

Zinnia did go home—skipping her usual writing time in the main street’s little square—but she was greeted by just a house. A truly old house.

A house with her things in it.

Notebooks, a couple novels she knew by heart—maybe that was her true home, hidden away for eternity in the pages of an ancient story—, all those dresses and tights because pants were not her friends, knives to chop food, knives to throw at flour bags, the pen her dad had given her years ago that she didn’t actually use but still kept for its sentimental value.

And all of it fit into a compact bag. Her life was one fucking travel bag, but none of this stuff would grow seeds anywhere if she ever wanted to settle. It was all a reminder of past times, her roots, in a way.

She could always ditch it all somewhere in the valley, get a cloak, and get lost in the mountains, declare herself missing. She’d know her way, she always did. She’d find a cave, start a fire, and eat her way through summer, fall, and winter. And when the ice melted and gave their rivers their true fluid shape back, she’d cross the mountain range into foreign land.

And she’d hide in the crowds. Nobody would even be able to tell where she was coming from, or who she was. A true clean start.

Nobody would find her because nobody would miss her. When you take a pebble from the shore of a river, the river doesn’t cry because it’s gone, does it? Neither does the bigger, sturdier rock on its path. Nor the other tiny stones under the surface of the water.

The river just runs its course. As all rivers do. Either they flood or they run dry, they don’t stop flowing for anybody. Least of all for a summer flower that grew there when she shouldn’t have.

Those were dark, dark things to be talking about, and Zinnia didn’t want to have to remember the conversation from earlier about running. That was too big a word for her. She’d never intentionally run, all she was doing was trying to find her place, wherever that was, and putting distance between
that goal and everybody else’s desire to have her stay.

Some still wished her back by their side, some still saw the sixteen-year-old. But she was almost
twice that old now. She didn’t own anybody anything.

And just like that, the phone rang, reminding her that she still had ties to her past, and that she
definitely wasn’t strong enough to sever them—not today, not soon, maybe not ever.

She picked it up, legs over the back of her couch.

“I’m supposed to be in the bookshop, you know?” she said. “If you’d called any other day, I
wouldn’t be able to answer.”

“So how come you’re not at work?” Anthony said.

“There wasn’t much to do. I think my boss has also gone home. Not a lot of people like books here.”

“Your boss would grow rich if you were a customer instead of a worker.”

“I don’t want to read now,” she said, pouting like a child on purpose. “I want to write my own stuff.”

Anthony laughed tensely. “And how’s that going for ya?”

She would’ve punched him for that if he’d been there, but instead she went on and on about things,
staying on the surface as much as she could. When she was done, she then listened as he shared the
latest town gossip with her and made a few jokes that she felt were a little too forced, like he was
trying to steer clear from something important by distracting her.

When she finally dared to ask about her parents—another sign that maybe it would take a while to be
able to sever, or at least loosen, the tether that still tied her back to Central—, Anthony went quiet
very suddenly, confirming her suspicions that he’d been hiding something from her. Something he
would only lie around because it was difficult to say, and because it was important.

“Spit it out,” she urged him. “Whatever it is, it can’t ruin my day much more than it already has
been.”

It was such meant as a dramatic exaggeration. She’d had much worse days, today had just been
tough on her because there were things she wasn’t ready to hear and fully process yet. Today, even
taking that into account, had been another blessing. She didn’t know what she’d been complaining
about, she didn’t. She had nothing to complain about, even in a place that had the potential to be
home and still wasn’t, even when she was so confused every day whenever she sat down in the
square and waited, even when she thought about her future. Zinnia had absolutely nothing to
complain about.

But she only saw that side of the coin when she heard Anthony take in a sharp breath and mutter:

“It’s—it’s your dad…”

Chapter End Notes

And thus, welcome to that subplot that wasn’t in the initial outlines for this fic and that's
a complete novelty for me because it strays a little from the usual stuff I've been writing
lately. Hope you enjoy <3

(also, I just have to say it: I love Buccaneer's scenes in the whole fic. He is such a wholesome character :D)
You’re only gone if someone misses you

Chapter Notes

and this is the subplot I invented halfway through writing this first arc and whose existence I owe entirely to binge-eating while outlining. It’s a little different from what I’m used to writing about, so please bear with me :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things kept on marching as well as one could have expected them to. Two more shifts of men had left for the mountains… without Buccaneer, of course. He would scowl for a couple of days about Olivier explicitly forbidding him to, and then he’d just forget about it.

All of this act,—the puppy eyes, the pucker in his lips—it amounted to nothing more than a feeble attempt at getting a second chance at flicking his past off.

That man didn’t miss his arm, or his younger valor, and he really hadn’t lost any of his stubbornness from then either, but he sure did still long for a fist fight in the snow against an enemy that in his mind had no shape and stood in a puddle of his own blood. He really didn’t care much about who he hit, he just wanted to hit something. And if he could help out while he did that, then fantastic, Olivier wouldn’t yell at him as much as she would if he simply went out there on a vengeance.

It was a good thing she was not going to let him out. He excelled at tracing the routes for those younger men to go on, he excelled at figuring out how many provisions they’d take, he excelled at waiting them for every time. He didn’t worry too much like she did. That’s why she still needed him here. This program worked because of him.

And it would certainly fall apart if it had to be someone else in charge of it in case he ever started involving himself personally in the incursions, which he wasn’t. Buccaneer would live out the rest of his useful military days ordering people about and cracking bad jokes; that’s how it should be, and how she wanted it to be.

Olivier left the fort at lunch break. Because she could afford this little hour out in the world. Such a small world, with such different rules. It was almost like a dream, that this existed right under her nose and that she had access at it, limited as it was.

She’d be skipping out on a full meal to do this, but it was worth it, and she’d almost always get some food from the kitchens later and bring it to her office anyway.

The town breathed the kind of life that Olivier had willingly, gladly given up on. People knew each other, even if in a bigger city they’d never even exchange two words. The baker with the little place Olivier went to and a butcher, a bookshop owner and a farmer, a city girl and the Northern Wall of Briggs…

In a larger settlement, Olivier would have never stopped in the middle of a street to rudely tell off a newcomer. In such places that she was familiar with—Central, or East City, or even North City—, there were officers patrolling the streets for a reason, so people like her didn’t have to bother. But she’d bothered, after all.
In different circumstances, Olivier would never have crossed a word with the flower girl. She would have never wanted to, either. But, here, she kept coming back, she kept circling around the town before she ventured into the main street. She kept pretending it didn’t make her feel the same way she’d felt on her first incursion into Drachma.

Her heart sped up a little, not enough to constitute a warning that her ice wall was thawing again, and she walked more slowly. It was such a short street, she wanted to savor every step.

Today, the sun was a little higher on the sky than usual. Its warmth was no longer pleasant and had directly become the scorching ball of fire the north had learned to respect. With burned crops and draughts, the typically bad food turned to ash in their mouths if summer came on too strong.

But life in Iver remained more or less the same. The same sweets, the same garments in the shops’ windows (already being sewn for the depths of winter), the same cobblestone, the same people walking around. *Clockwork, of a different kind*, she thought. This one didn’t need someone checking on it in case the gears got a little rusty.

Olivier didn’t realize how much her thoughts were relying on the cyclic nature of life here until she literally was right at the spot where main street, minor streets, and the main square merged into one another. A spot she’d hardly paid attention to before this spring and that now was almost an obligatory stop in her way.

A spot that today was not occupied by the usual tenant.

Olivier stood there for a moment, looking at the empty space in front her, shrugged, and went on her way.

It was decidedly too late for the flower girl to still be there. The sun was too high, it was too hot. And Olivier had never stayed there long enough to find how much time the girl actually spent in her chair, looking at the world with her big brown eyes like it’d been drawn for her to write about. So absurd, that eyes like those could see more clearly than anybody else what stood there, right in front of them. It was such a waste of talent.

Olivier didn’t make much of this absence, though, mostly attributing it to the late hour. She was not to make anything out of this, not at all. Everybody here had lives, boring and fruitless as they were. Lives to go back to when lunch break was over. She would simply have to come back another day, that was all.

*Or… perhaps she could just stay here a while longer, walking around in the sun instead of sitting in her office watching the hours tick by.*

Zinnia had sat for an hour at the station in North City. She’d missed the previous train, after a long while in the back of a smelly cart being pulled by even smellier oxen to get to the city.

Then, when the train that would take her back to her homeland had finally opened its doors for the passengers to start getting in, she’d spent another twenty minutes waiting for the engines to awaken from their slumber.

At least she’d found a decent place to sit. It was early enough that she was one of the very few people aboard this train, but she guessed not many more would get in even as the departure time neared.
She tapped her fingers on the hard covers of her notebook. If the driver was on a coffee break, it had already lasted long enough. The north might be well-known for its strict customs and that obnoxious habit of theirs to always follow the same rules, but its people sure did become lax when it suited them.

Or maybe Zinnia was just too anxious to get this over with as soon as possible.

When the train finally started moving, slowly, like a beast yawning and stretching before setting off to hunt, she found herself letting out a long deep breath.

Now she’d really done it. She was really doing it, and there was no going back, no stopping this train to get off and run and run and hide.

But she should have felt proud. This had been the adult thing to do.

The man had pushed her legs on his way to sit in front of her, a few stops after North City. The further south they went, the more people got in, but it still wasn’t enough to fill the entire train, so why was this man sitting right across her? Didn’t he have other seats to choose from where he wouldn’t have to ask for permission to sit?

Zinnia rolled her eyes, but she was reading, so she hoped he hadn’t seen. Plus, the windows were open and her hair, when left to its own devices like right now, did wonderfully at hiding her face when there was a breeze that scattered it as it pleased.

“So, where are you going?” asked the man in front of her, like he hadn’t gotten the whole point of her deliberately ignoring him. “I’m going to propose. That’s why I’m travelling. Came up north to work, but met my fiancée—or soon to be fiancée—” He laughed, like it was funny. “—down at Central years ago, where there’s actually people to fall in love with. Up north there’s so few eligible girls, gosh… Though people actually like living here, I guess.” He sighed.

Zinnia was tempted to tell him that being so close to the regional border with Central didn’t count as living north, but she knew better.

“I can’t wait to get there, though,” he kept going. He had a strange accent, posh. “D’you have any idea how long it will take to arrive?”

She shook her head without looking up at him.

“Well, I guess it depends on where you get off, I hadn’t thought of that.” He chuckled loudly.

Some people just did not understand that in public spaces it was polite and actually the common-sense thing to do to remain as quiet as possible. No, some people just acted like the entire world was their backyard and they could do what they wanted. What was worse, they didn’t once reflect on the fact that it wasn’t.

“Anyhow, what brings you to Central? What’re you doing there?”

Zinnia kept her eyes on the notebook, turned the page slowly, then said, bored:

“Maybe I’m going to go get married as well.”

The man made a surprised little noise.
“Are you?” he asked. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Maybe it’s not a guy.”

Taken aback by her icy tone, he gulped, then kept on asking:

“And where are you guys getting married? I hear spring’s a lovely time to officiate a ceremony. Mine’s in late summer, or … well, I hope it will take place then.” He laughed again. “Gotta make sure the wife likes that too, but I really wouldn’t mind getting married anywhere, in any season. How ‘bout you? Have you talked to your lovely soon-to-be spouse yet?”

Zinnia slammed her notebook covers shut and shot an angry look at him from behind her bangs.

“I’m not getting married,” she said. “I just wanted you to shut up.”

Without blushing or even looking bashful for being called out like that, the man just smiled and scratched the back of his neck.

“Sorry, I’m nervous,” he said. “I talk when I’m nervous”

She didn’t say anything, leaned on her open palm, elbow on the window sill, and looked out at the moving world outdoors. The grass fields with cattle roaming among the thin stems, the occasional flower in the distance, bearing the colors of spring and summer. She was grateful she couldn’t smell it, the only thing coming to her nose was the odorous steam from the engines and the scent of the breeze.

“I can stop if you like,” the man added. “I think I brought a book too.”

She felt like groaning openly, to make her point clearer in case he hadn’t gotten it, and it didn’t look like he had.

“It’s fine,” she said instead, not bothering to look at him.

And apparently he finally got it with that. Sometimes indifference worked wonders. Only sometimes… Some other times, treating someone like you were perfectly okay with their abrasiveness turned out even better, even if it ended up prolonging the game. It proved that Zinnia would keep on standing her ground for as long as it took. It was a declaration of intentions.

This, though, this was bland and stupid and she didn’t want to prolong anything. It was already a long enough train ride on its own without an idiot talking to her like he’d met her somewhere cute.

“Where are you going, then?” he asked, in a slightly less confident tone, a while later.

Zinnia sighed. Was there really an answer to that question that she would ever like?

She wasn’t going home. So she wouldn’t say that, in case saying it would make it true, would bind her to the family life forever.

She wasn’t just going anywhere either, she had a destination. This wasn’t roaming, not this time. But it wasn’t business. Family was not business, no matter how hard her mother had always tried to teach her otherwise.

“Back to the beginning…” she finally answered.
Back to the heat and the small-town life, only this town’s small life definitely wouldn’t be anything to get used to. She’d been born there, everybody would probably stop her on the way to her family home. She hadn’t stepped one foot there in five years. There’d never been any reason to.

Back to Anthony. Back to Dew’s shadow. Back to her mother’s glower.

The thing was, Anthony shouldn’t have told her about her father. But he had. Because Zinnia would’ve eaten him alive on the phone if he’d only just left it at ‘it’s your dad’.

“He’s okay, it’s just…” he’d said right after, like that cancelled out the rest. Like being okay was a statement that just happened to follow the words ‘it’s your dad’. “You don’t have to really worry.”

“Don’t I?” Zinnia had snapped back at him. She’d gotten up from where she was sitting, unable to stay still. “I have to literally fucking coax it out of you to even hear about this! Yes, I do have to worry.” She had exhaled quickly. If she calmed down, would this become a two-way conversation or would he keep insisting that nothing was wrong while still asserting that it wasn’t not wrong either? “What’s happened to him? Why did nobody think to tell me before that something was happening?”

Don’t you know? A little voice inside her head had said. Don’t you know already why they never call until it’s too late? But she did know. And it hurt that the main reason behind that wasn’t a desire to protect her or shield her from it, like her mother had taken to saying in the past.

“It’s a knee thing,” Anthony had kept going, sounding calm and yet probably sweating out of every pore in his body. He knew he’d made a mistake in both not mentioning it before and not going into detail now. “He just needs some help moving around, that’s why he’s staying back at the house more often.”

Zinnia had groaned loudly.

“When were you even telling me? Please tell me you were going to, at least!”

For a few seconds he had been quiet and Zinnia had seen it coming. Of course she had.

“Your mom insisted,” he’d finally said, confirming what she’d more than just suspected. “I’m sorry.”

Zinnia had taken a deep breath, then another. If her father’s situation didn’t reach worrying levels yet, perhaps she’d be able to find something to solve this that wouldn’t follow her mother’s plan. A companion at day while her mother was working, perhaps some pills if there was any pain.

“I’m coming down there,” she’d stated. She had enough money for a train ride, enough money to pay for any medication and then come back here. Suddenly, Iver tugged at her heart strings like they were its only means of salvation. Like the town was drowning and needed a bendy wooden table to hang on to.

If she left, she’d be coming back, though. She’d just visit her family for a few days, fix whatever needed fixing, and ride back home. To her bookshop and her square and her poor writing and her soul-searching.

But apparently Anthony hadn’t thought that was a good idea, or even an idea to be had:

“Don’t! She’ll blame me.”

“She can blame whoever she damn well likes,” Zinnia’d spat. “I’m coming.”
If only she could get in touch with one of those knowledgeable doctors in the area, perhaps they would suggest some novel treatment for whatever was ailing her father, and this would just be a scare. A scare and the way to coerce her into going back to the old roots.

She could feel Anthony’s fear at her arrival, though. Being in touch with her mom, it came as no surprise that she’d been adamant on him keeping quiet about this. But she’d been a fool to.

Now he’d been trying to mend his mistake, just so he didn’t have to face Zinnia’s mother.

“There’s surgery,” he had said, his desperation almost palpable. He’d probably still thought he could convince Zinnia nothing was wrong. “She’s trying to get your dad to go through it first. We didn’t want to tell you anything till then.”

Till the poor man was about to breathe his last and there’d been no other choice because someone had to sign the papers to co-own the butchery.

“And has it worked?” Zinnia had asked. But she could tell the answer was ‘no’, anyway. Her father cowered away in the face of few things, but going to the doctor for more than a quick checkup was one of them.

“He doesn’t want it,” Anthony had replied. “Too expensive.”

But Zinnia knew it wasn’t just that. She knew why she hadn’t been told on top of all those excuses. Her mother had been waiting till the last possible moment, so Zinnia not only would come home but have to stay there to help with the butchery.

Why was it always the fucking butchery?

If she’d kept quiet about this until Zinnia’s dad was literally dying, Zinnia would have had no choice. She knew she would’ve gone there at the speed of light, and she knew very well, just like her mother did, that she would not have been able to leave again.

Family was family.

With a little luck, she could get on a train today, be there by late evening.

“I’ll bring money,” Zinnia had said. In her mind, she’d already been packing her few belongings again. “We’ll talk to a doctor or something and he’ll have the surgery.”

At this point, Anthony had no longer pretended to be in control of the situation.

“Zin, please,” he’d said, “it’s nothing. He’s fine.”

“No, he’s not fine!” Zinnia had shouted. “This isn’t fine.”

Keeping information from her, manipulating when and how she got hold of it… When Zinnia got there, things would change. She’d talk to whoever she had to, hire whoever she had to, work three jobs if that was what it came to.

“Your mom is going to kill me,” Anthony had complained.

“I don’t care! You should’ve told me sooner.”

And just like that, she hung up and started packing.

Anthony shouldn’t have been the one to tell her about her father. Now her mother was going to go
ballistic on her. And the woman was almost certainly going to draw her card, because it was the last chance she’d ever have at it, but she was very wrong if she thought Zinnia wouldn’t fight back at this point.

She wanted to have arrived already, so she could figure out a way out of this, so she could leave again. Because, boy was she going to.

But… she thought sadly, perhaps she ought to make sure Iver and the life she’d slowly built up there would still be waiting for her at her return.

_I will not go in_, Olivier told herself. She’d been walking around for a while, not doing anything, just walking. Just repeating those words over and over. She would not go in, she had no reason to. It was late, the shop might probably, _surely_, be closed, and she’d have walked for no reason—or worse, for one single reason she would not admit.

No. It would always be the nice weather, the fact that she didn’t feel like supervising half-built tanks or schedules, or the boredom that just seemed to come the second she realized she had paperwork to pay attention to.

_I will not go in_, Olivier told herself. But there it was. The little sign with the name of the bookstore. It was here. Now she’d seen it, now she could go.

But she didn’t. Because in spite of the late hour, the door was open.

_I will not go in_, she told herself, definitely getting in.

“Oh, hi,” Candie said. “How can I help?”

“I don’t need anything,” Olivier said at once. And it was the truth. Any interest she might have in this place had decreased after it’d become obvious that no library, bookstore, or private collection had books on what Olivier wanted.

Of course, she knew better than to make reference to any of that. As far as this lady in front of her was concerned, Olivier had very important business to conduct here once more.

“But,” she continued. Her ‘t’ came out too plosive, “the girl who works here had ordered something for me. I haven’t seen her lately.”

She hoped that was specific and innocuous enough to not get Candie to ask questions.

Candie didn’t. Candie grinned. She was up to date on the business Zinnia had in common with the Wall of Briggs, so she knew what this was about. And she found it endearing, to be honest. But she wouldn’t betray a friend’s trust, even when said friend didn’t happen to be present.

“Well, I don’t know anything about that,” Candie said. “And I don’t know anything about Zinnia either. She didn’t come in this morning.”

Olivier’s entire plan—slapdash and too quickly drafted—was demolished by that statement. She hadn’t been counting on that.

“Ah,” she said.

“I’ll go down to her house later, if I can. It’s so _unlike_ her to not have shown up… Would you like
me to ask her about your order?” Candie asked, her eyes smiling just as much as her lips were.

“No, that’s alright,” Olivier said with a curt nod. She turned around to leave, back to the steamy heat of the mid-afternoon. “I’ll come another time.” Shit, that was becoming her fucking signature move whenever she came to this place, wasn’t it?

She’d enter the establishment, trying to look like she had no idea why she was there and yet trying to pass for the opposite, for a woman with a plan, and then she’d promptly take refuge in the fact that if things didn’t go her way, she could always just bolt and come when her nerves weren’t this shaky. Which they shouldn’t be, they had no reason to be.

One foot out, one foot still in, Olivier heard the little shop’s phone ring.

“Candie’s bookstore, what can I do for you?” Candie said, then immediately— “Zinnia, honey? Oh it’s you. I didn’t recognize your number. What happened to you, are you okay?”

Candie put her open palm on the phone’s speaker.

“General, she’s on, would you like to ask her personally about your… business, now?”

Olivier didn’t blush, and she would always feel eternally grateful for that. She just shook her head. But she didn’t say anything either, she just stood there, hating herself for it.

“Oh, dear, of course, just take as many days off as you need, I’ll still be here waiting for you, huh? And don’t worry about me, you know we have one customer and a half.” Candie shot one very quick but very distinctive look at Olivier. “And take care of yourself!”

Not until Candie had hung up the phone did Olivier realize she continued to just stand there, even after she’d heard what she’d come here to hear.

“Well, I suppose you will have to come another time, General. I’m sorry.”

Olivier simply nodded, thanked her quietly, and left for real this time to return to her responsibilities. She was needed there, at least, even if it was just for approval of this thing and the other. Here, in this town, she was only a figure of some distant authority who now had nobody to deliberately intimidate.

But, as she rode back, she didn’t feel as exhilarated and alive as she’d definitely felt other days. Her chest didn’t flutter with feelings she didn’t want to process at the thought of reading a new paragraph from that flower girl, nor did she allow her brain to anticipate the words—all of them terrible and so on point she wanted to destroy them, yes, of course—that had been written there for her, because there were none.

For the first time in two months, Olivier Armstrong had no piece of paper concealed in the folds of her uniform, and she would not bring it to her office later, while sipping bitter and terrible coffee, and read it until she knew it by heart.

Today she was just… back to her old winter self, the person she’d wanted to change back into since spring had fallen. She was, once again, impenetrable.

Nobody was waiting for her when she got to the rustic platform. It’s not like she’d expected anyone to stand there, a cardboard sign with her name on it. Her friends loved her, her family loved her, but
they all knew this wasn’t a happy reunion. This was work. Besides, she could damn well find her own way. How many years had it been? Not enough to erase the memory of these streets, slithering around till one swallowed the other.

The gravel under her soles cracked and popped, like popcorn. Even if the entire place vibrated with life, people coming and going, exchanging words here and there, Zinnia would only hear her own feet as they touched the ground, over and over. The distance from the small station covered enough to make her toes hurt already from the friction.

But it was a sweet pain. The pain of remembrance.

These people, once her neighbors, didn’t look at her twice. She smiled to herself at wrong she’d been to expect anything different. It was no wonder, really, that she didn’t get recognized. She’d had a few inches of hair trimmed off than she’d had in the past and her skin had grown even a darker shade of brown in the sun of the south.

But even so, the children playing in the street right outside of her parents’ house were the children of her childhood friends; the butchery a few streets farther down would surely be full of clients Zinnia would almost be able to name; these streets crawled with flashes of her adolescence, of the people she’d shared it with, sitting down in the shade, talking about nothing, wanting to talk about everything. And when night fell, if Zinnia looked up at the sky, she’d see the same stars she’d written about in her youth when she was in love. Those tiny spots of cosmic life—some of them long gone, consumed in the universe’s ice—might shine proud and distant, coated in arrogance, but they were beautiful. They were like love itself, a memory of it.

This town was just like them now. Faint ghosts of memory. Her past, not her present, never her future.

Zinnia didn’t have to get a key out to open the door. Because of the heat, a simple curtain was drawn between the interior of the house and the heat outside. She only had to grab the warm fabric, push it aside, and step in.

And something so simple took minutes. Her hand shook, then it didn’t, then she just pushed past the curtain into the past.

“Mr Erwin,” Anthony’s voice said then from the inside, “she’s here!”

When she got through the main gate, she definitely wasn’t expecting this mayhem. Soldiers running in all directions, their voices loud. In no circumstances were they trained to behave like stray sheep in the middle of a valley at night. These men were trotting about like they had hungry wolves chasing after them.

“What the hell—?” she muttered to herself.

Someone came to her immediately, the bearer of news.

“The Mountain Men are back, sir.” Olivier knew that could not be good. They’d just left. “There’s been… well, they’re at the cells level.”

“Is any of them hurt?” she snapped. That’s what mattered the most. All of them safe and unhurt and back in the fort. Back with news, probably. Had Drachma finally taken the first step towards breaking the alliance?
“No, sir, it’s just…”

She pushed past them in a rush and stood in the center of the room. They were all going their own way, scattered like she wasn’t used to seeing them. If this had been an attack on Drachma’s part, they already had the upper hand.

“Stop squabbling about like hens and get your act together, men! To your posts—now!”

Until she had more information that was all she could say, and they listened. Not because her word was ultimate, but because she was speaking reason. Whatever had happened, being calm would always be the first step towards victory; it led to minds who weren’t panicking and could think clearly.

“I don’t see an army at our door yet, but if it comes, we will be ready,” she finished. It wasn’t an order, it was a fact.

After that, she quickly walked to the stairs and climbed down to the lower levels. They kept the cells near the boilers; the first men who’d built this wall had found that it made the prisoners mad—they almost always expected Briggs’ well-known frost, not the infuriating heat.

And what she found there she had never, not once, expected to find. Not so soon, not like this. Because it meant war was looming, breathing closer and closer at the back of her neck. If she pressed it, she’d be able to hear the thunderous roar of Drachma’s cannons being dragged across the dirt; the clash of swords, the smell of a thousand thousand men coming to get her.

The men in the room were dressed for the mountain, camouflaged in browns and greens and ready for most weather temperatures the Briggs range could throw at them. Only they were here, zippers down, hats down, jackets off.

They saluted upon her entrance, a row of tall bulky men, their backs to the bars of the cells.

“General,” they all echoed.

“I assume you’ve found something worth returning early for,” she said, frowning. What else, if no one was wounded?

“Yes sir,” they said, and they moved aside, letting her see into the cell. A woman sat inside one, hands tied, feet tied, dirty blonde hair down, covering her face. Olivier’s heart raced. “We found her on the trail near the border. She tried to escape, then she… took a few shots, when she saw she couldn’t lose us.”

Olivier took a good look at her men. Every single one that should have gone for the mountains was here, which meant there truly had been no wounded.

“You’re a terrible shot,” Olivier said, rising her voice so it would carry. Her men trembled slightly until they realized she was addressing the woman in the cell. “Forty men, and you didn’t even take one of them down?” She chuckled, emotionlessly. It was what bothered people more, that she acted like she didn’t give a shit. Sometimes she genuinely didn’t. “What were you planning to do once you infiltrated our country? Shooting us all?”

Olivier laughed again. No, that was never their plan. Their plan was to run back and forth, a mouse crossing the border with precious information to be exchanged. Like Olivier went around discussing her strategy with everyone in this fort. Like she didn’t know how easy it was to appropriate government secrets.
“Leave us,” she told her soldiers. They did so in silence. Forty men… all safe, all back. She’d have to make them return to the mountain, in case there were more lookouts out there. In case this was Drachma’s final declaration of war. Oh how long she’d been awaiting it… She could already smell the gunpowder, feel the red stains of blood in her uniform, in her skin. In her mind, she always pictured it as the blood of her enemies, never that of her allies.

She walked, tall and proud, towards the bars, where she stood a good few inches away from them. The other woman hadn’t moved at all, there was just a hint of a smirk on her face that Olivier wanted to punch into oblivion. It said ‘I am above you, and I will not give you the satisfaction of speaking back to you’.

Olivier would have none of that.

“Don’t bother, Drachman,” Olivier finally said, breaking the silence. “I know you understand me fine. And I know that spy tongue of yours can speak it just as well, so I don’t intend to play games with you. I’m sure you will soon appreciate that fact as well.” She crossed her arms behind her back, poised and regal. Unmovable. “Who sent you?”

The other woman’s smirk grew wider.

“You think nothing will happen to you here, don’t you? That because there’s still peace I won’t skin you alive until you tell me what I want to know?” Olivier continued, still under her calm facade. Then, in the brink of a moment, she grabbed at the iron bars with one hand so tightly she could feel its hardness underneath her glove. “You’re going to tell us everything in order to spare your pitiful little life,” Olivier yelled, her face an entirely different picture than two seconds ago. Didn’t Drachma want the Northern Wall of Briggs? Well, they were going to get it, and they would choke on it. “Or you’ll live so long and so painfully in your self-inflicted silence that you’ll only break it to beg us to end your misery.” Olivier smiled evilly, uncurling her hand from around the bar and dusting it off on her uniform. Once again, she was calm; there was nothing to see here. “But that misery will never end.” Olivier leaned towards the woman, voice loud and clear, and what was worse: determined. “It will never end.”

On her way out, she found her men still waiting there. She gave them another twenty-four hours to get ready for a new round-trip; she wanted every spy there could be hiding in the mountains behind bars, and these men would find them.

After that, she found Major Miles working in her office. She dropped down on the chair rather than sat.

“I want two men appointed in the cells at all times,” she said. “Day and night. How many shifts could you fit into the current schedule?”

Miles frowned, twirling the pen in his hand.

“I’m not sure. Two, at best.”

Olivier shook her head.

“That’s not enough. There will be twelve.”

Miles nodded, doing a quick calculation, and got back to work, redoing all the current schedule to accommodate those extra shifts. Twenty men he’d have to cut off from their posts temporarily, until they got the information they all needed. By then, he’d probably need to literally reform the entire fort’s schedule to adapt to war anyway.
War was brewing. War had been brewing for as long as Fort Briggs had stood.

“General, sir…” he asked, “what do you plan to do with her?” There was no need to specify which ‘her’ he was making reference to.

With those shifts of men standing guard all day long, the prisoner could never get enough sleep if they woke her up right after their shifts had ended. And she would not be allowed to sleep during more than two shifts.

It would eat her alive from the inside.

“If she doesn’t talk soon,” Olivier replied bluntly, simply, “I’ll make her wish she was dead, but I’ll never offer her that chance.”

Miles just looked at her.

“Will that work?”

“I don’t know, Miles…” she said. It was the first spy she’d had in her hands in too long. They’d never had to deal with this in times of peace, fragile as that peace was. “But she won’t talk unless she’s forced to, that’s for certain.”

Chapter End Notes

Ending notes: the scant world-building I’ve done on Drachma and the war between them and Amestris was inspired by The Northern Theatre by InkuisitivSkins
The house lay in almost permanent dimness, in contrast to the bothersome bright light coming in through the door. It smelled like old wood and varnish, like they’d painted the furniture in big quantities of the stuff to prolong its usefulness. None of that helped make it feel any less as if Zinnia had just walked in into an abandoned castle. She navigated her old childhood home, her fingers tracing the contour of the walls to find her way to her parents’ bedroom.

Her dad was happily sitting down at the desk, one leg bent uncomfortably.

She shot one quick look at Anthony, who was leaning on the doorframe, and sat down demurely on the bed.

“So, the knee, huh?” she told her father in low voice.

Her dad turned around on the chair to smile at her like nothing had happened and she was back from summer camp in the city. In a way, it was a little like that. She was back. And he hadn’t seen her in a very long time.

They both noticed now all the changes in each other’s faces. Zinnia saw more lines on her father’s than she remembered, and the stiffness in his leg worried her sick but she didn’t think she had a right to say anything. A wave of guilt hit her repeatedly during the two seconds it took for her dad to talk:

“Always knew whatever made me stay home longer than necessary would be something stupid.”

She shook her head.

“It’s not stupid. Just bad luck.”

“It’s not that big of a deal, anyway. It’ll get better on its own.”

“No, it won’t,” Zinnia said, louder than she’d meant to. “If you can’t stand, then you need help with it.”

In spite of her tone, her father just beamed at her. He looked… so lively, even now, after so long. Like he’d never lost that spark, that glow that burned brighter in the fog… Like he was still a young man.

“I’m fine, Zinnia, really. You didn’t need to come.”

She made a huge effort not to gasp. *Not you too…* That was a low blow from everybody, but coming from him it felt like she’d gotten stabbed in the chest. They’d all spent years nagging at her to come for a visit, and now that she actually had left everything, she found out her timing hadn’t been
exactly impeccable and that nobody wanted her there yet.

“Well, I did. And you’re all going to have to deal with that. You wanted your little girl back once, right? Good, because now I am here.”

Her father chuckled amiably, hoisted himself up from his chair as best he could and plopped down next to her, putting his hand on hers. Those were the hands of a butcher who’d lovingly given up on the profession to provide a home for his wife and child. “You’re too good, kid.”

Her eyes sought his, as much as it hurt her to. Those eyes were the same shade of red she hadn’t inherited, the last embers of a bloodline that now was more Amestrian than Ishvalan.

“Anthony told me there was surgery or something?” she asked.

Her dad shook his head. She knew how little fond he was of doctors and didn’t need more context. Even if she understood, it still made her angry. This wasn’t anything like the man who had raised her to rise over any obstacle in life.

“Okay, then what? Wait till it gets worse? Wait till you can’t really move?”

“It doesn’t matter much, does it? I’m out of the best years of my life.”

“You’re out of your mind, come on…”

She knew she was pushing into dangerous grounds, but she had to anyway. He was really ready to give up on better mobility just because he was scared and convinced old age had to be this way.

“The house has been a bit of a burden for a long time,” he told her, and his gaze was clean and honest, and it broke her heart. Why had no one reached her, asked for her help before? “This has nothing to do with it, although it helps…”

“It helps? How does it help? How could it possibly help?”

Now, of all times, her dad chose to look away.

“Making the decision to…” he muttered, “bring someone in.”

“I’ve been coming in from time to time, already,” Anthony said from the door. Zinnia flinched at the sound of his voice; she’d forgotten he was still there. How long had the fucker known about this, been helping at her own household? How long had he kept quiet about it just because he was terrified of an old woman with an impressive knife collection?

Zinnia held her father’s hand in hers.

“Dad, get the surgery,” she almost ordered. “I’ll pay for it, I brought money.”

He continued to avoid her gaze.

“You know I don’t like… doctors.”

“Neither do I. Neither does anybody. But if you need it—you need it.”

He shrugged, like he’d heard that a thousand times from a thousand different people and no one had managed to convince him. As long as he could move around, more or less, and it didn’t hurt too much, why would he face his fears? Why would he move his ass? Sometimes he was too much like her, Zinnia thought. And in this case it wasn’t a good thing. He was running, just like she’d always
done. Now, she had to become her own worst enemy to keep him from making the same mistakes she had.

“It doesn’t even hurt that much,” her father said. “I just… need some a little more help around the house, that’s all.”

Abandoning politeness for a moment, Zinnia spat back a reply:

“Get. The. Surgery.”

“Zinnia Erwin,” suddenly said a voice that Zinnia hadn’t allowed herself to think about in literal months. The doom it carried into the room settled into her heart like recently thawed ice. Now, she was truly back. “Don’t let me catch you speaking to your father like that.”

And just like that, silent and invisible like a shadow in the dark, Zinnia’s mother walked into the light of her own bedroom, apron splattered with blood and her hair wound in a tight bun, a few hairs stray from it.

Zinnia immediately sat up straighter and removed her hand from atop her father’s. Her mouth was a desert, her heart a horse in a race.

“Hello, mum.”

It began gently, as gently as Olivier Armstrong was capable of bringing it on. A little under a thousand calories a day, no more than two full consecutive hours of sleep. Then, the lights.

Every afternoon without fail she would step down Briggs smelly dark stairs to the cell where Esfir was kept, and she would repeat the same questions. They were never uttered in anything but a calm reassured voice that’s confident will have answers in return, and they were never imposed on the spy more than three times.

Olivier would ask once, then wait patiently for a few seconds as Esfir glared at her and it became clear she would remain quiet. After that brief span of time had passed—more of a courtesy than anything else—, Olivier left the cell only to return to it a few minutes later, a flashlight tightly held in her hand.

She’d turn off the general light in the area and approach the woman in chains. Olivier always entered the cell, always left the door closed and locked behind her afterwards. Her men had asked if she wasn’t scared of getting hit and getting killed or having the detainee escape.

Olivier didn’t tell them that fear didn’t play into this scenario. Fear as a major emotion had been left behind the day she’d taken the train north. Emotions had been overtaken by duty.

If she was to get choked to death by a Drachman spy, fine. She’d make sure to coax some information out of her first.

She stood in the cell, towering over the silhouette of the blonde woman, and asked a second time.

“What did your country hope to accomplish sending you across the border?”

The spy chuckled and murmured things in Drachman.

Olivier stepped forward. The spy’s hands and feet were cuffed to the bench where she’d been
allowed to sit. If she’d spoken, if she’d divulged her government’s secrets, Olivier would have been lenient, considering.

But Esfir spat at the general’s feet when she was done laughing, and Olivier approached her slowly, as if she was in no hurry at all. She’d been in a hurry for fifteen years, fifteen years of scars and overcomplicated plots, and radio silence.

Gradually, she pushed the spy’s head against the wall of the cell. It wasn’t done gently, but it wasn’t done harshly. Not yet.

Olivier forced the spy’s right eye open, earning a grunt in response, and clicked the flashlight on.

Esfir swore in Drachman, but Olivier didn’t even flinch at the sudden resistance, at the force the body under her hand was exerting just to have one eye closed and safe from the light.

Oh how the human body fought when in pain… and how the mind struggled not to scream, not to give up the last ounces of dignity that still remained.

Olivier asked a third time.

“What were your plans?”

The beam of light was pristine against the iris of the Drachma’s spy. It did not move an inch. Not when she fought again, not when she tried to bite Olivier’s fingers away from her face.

The Ice Queen pushed harder, but she didn’t ask a fourth time.

Esfir screamed. Olivier pushed.

When the screams got louder, the radio silence grew. This woman would not speak.

Olivier left without a warning, the same way she had arrived. She could come again in a few hours, with something else to play with, and she would ask the same questions she’d been asking for days: who sent you, what was your plan, when is Drachma attacking.

She left the lights off on her way out of the cells. The light would be harder on the spy’s eyes the next time they were on.

Buccaneer saluted her when she exited the room.

“Any improvements?” he asked, like he was asking for the weather forecast in the hopes that it wouldn’t rain.

“None.”

She began walking, clearly done with the conversation. She had the feeling that Buccaneer wanted to rub it in that if she’d sent him on that mission he would’ve brought back better information than Olivier could ever hope to get now.

“The girl will not talk, General,” he grumbled.

“She will.” Eventually…

“How can you know?”

She didn’t.
“Do you want to be in there with her any earlier than you have to?” Olivier snarled. She pointed at the men at the door of the cells. “Because I’m sure those two will appreciate having their shift split in three.”

Buccaneer’s face went entirely pale—paler than it already was.

“General—”

She could tell what he was going to say long before he thought to say it. She was not giving up on this plan, even if she had to begin contemplating other alternatives.

“No. Shut up.”

He trotted along to catch up with her quick stride.

“We’re wasting resources, sir. Not to mention, hope. How many days has it been?”

“Not enough,” she insisted. “I will continue to do this until we get what we want.”

Buccaneer had to lean forward to speak to her, she was walking too fast, and she, tall as she was, remained a head shorter than him.

“If I may—and I know I may not but still—I think it would be wiser to just kill her off and send more parties to the border,” he said. “The men are ready, readier than ever. We know what to look for now.”

“This isn’t about us being ready or not. It’s about using the situation to our favor while we can.”

“We can’t torture her forever. She won’t share anything with us.”

“We’ll make her,” Olivier said. Not because she believed anymore at this point, but because she wanted to believe. “However, I will fit more raids into the schedules. Talk to Miles about it.”

“Miles isn’t in charge,” Buccaneer said at once. Of course, he’d want to be involved even in that, not just budgets and organizing the material that the men would take to the border. “I just—not that kindness should be involved, but I figured we were smarter than this?”

“We?” she said, mockingly.

He rephrased it to get himself understood:

“Is there a plan B, in case the girl never talks?”

“Yes. Get back on track, with double the work force. If they sent one spy, they will send more, perhaps even a rescue party, when she doesn’t contact them back.”

Buccaneer frowned. They had a time limit to adhere to, then. If they didn’t get the information soon, Drachma would come banging at their doors with all the heavy machinery.

“You think they might have started to look for her now?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she added between her teeth: “If it were me up there, definitely.”

He patted her back with a thunderous chuckle. She glowered in return.

“Lucky you’re down here, then,” he said, and he meant it as a compliment.
She looked at him, acknowledging. Convincing herself she’d torture every bit of Drachma’s plan out of the spy was one thing, but actually believing herself capable of it was another. They needed to get moving now, if this didn’t work.

“I’ll send more parties to the border,” she finally said, reconciling. “Regardless of whether she talks, we won’t let them have the upper hand.”

Buccaneer smiled. She could tell he thought this was the right thing. He approved of her strength, just like once he’d mocked her weakness.

From then on, Olivier joined the patrols. She joined the watches. She worked harder than anyone and pretended she wasn’t. She introduced methods of torture into her daily routine her younger self would’ve vomited at the sight of.

Esfir would not divulge one word of the plan, but Olivier did get her to swear and scream loudly in Drachman, over and over. She’d seen personally to having the spy’s hamstrings severed, on top of the blinding torture, the starvation, the sleep-deprivation, and the cuts. One for each time she wouldn’t answer. Olivier left the cell covered in blood every single time, and nodded at the doctor waiting outside of it so he’d get in and stop Esfir from dying prematurely. The walls, too, ended up inevitably covered in dark stains.

Olivier dutifully scrubbed her hands in the shower, after, to get the same dark stains off her skin, but she did not do so in guilt or remorse or even contemplation. Just routine: get clean to get messy again in a few hours. Work that wasn’t enjoyable was still work, and this definitely didn’t make it into the top 3 enjoyable activities she did around here, yet she delivered impeccably.

If the men at Briggs had ever thought they had reasons to be afraid of their commander, now she had proved them wrong. This would make for an absolute substitute to any pseudo-reason they’d had. Not many people were capable of torture, and these were honest men trained by the hardships of life to become good and obedient while retaining their own values. Olivier had not, ever, trained them in the art she saw performed every day. She hoped she would never have to.

They watched her out of the corner of their eyes, during patrols outside at night and when they had to share prisoner watch with her or wait outside the cell as they heard the spy beg for her life. And they watched Olivier in fear, not respect, not admiration. Perhaps this was how Briggs’ perfect order began to crumble, because of a general too brute for her men to ascertain her right to lead.

Strength above all was the Briggs way, but this didn’t constitute strength, this brought forth a deliberate abuse of it in order to remain strong, Olivier thought. Should she sacrifice what she’d believed in for years in favor of winning a war that hadn’t even started? She definitely meant to.

She’d been sent north as indirect punishment from her male superiors, and she’d stayed because Briggs had needed her sorely after she’d proved her value. The wall of Briggs had needed a head to operate its whole body. She was the wall, she couldn’t just... get rid of her only chance to be able to stealthily penetrate into foreign land.

She would just have to hope the men would see her reasoning behind this, for she couldn’t admit it to them out loud. And that’s why she worked harder than anyone in the fort. To prove that she hadn’t become a power-hungry enemy residing inside Briggs, that she was still the same, doing what she’d always done: making hard choices and putting them to practice if others couldn’t.

Miles found her one night when he’d just finished his patrol around the fort’s perimeter and he was ready to leave his things in her office and immediately move to the bunks to get a few hours’ sleep.
It was around 4 am, and the corridors were silent like graveyards, with the occasional creak from the pipes. These were the sounds that haunted everybody’s dreams and whispered lonely words in the night.

Olivier was well past staying up at that hour, even if she was stubborn about it. But when Miles was about to get the door pushed open, he heard her curse under her breath. Stubbornness had won this time, apparently.

At the image of him coming in, she shot him a quick look and then her face relaxed visibly. Had she been expecting a threat? Certainly, if the evil beyond Amestris ever reached Briggs, it would be General Armstrong they’d go for first.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said.

Miles nodded.

“Developments?”

“It’s all quiet out there,” he said.

She’d sent four parties into the range that very morning, following Buccaneer’s advice (who, as always, had remained at the fort). She had all her men working at full capacity, herself included. This would not be a sustainable situation in the long-run. And the fucking Drachman spy didn’t open her mouth for anything more than raw screaming that took both parties involved nowhere.

Olivier’s temples throbbed steadily, as they had for hours now.

Since she had nothing of interest to say, she just nodded and went back to working on the plans for the tank. They needed to get their hands on special antifreeze fuel for those, for when winter came, and she had no idea where they might be able to acquire it this time of year.

“I don’t mean to pry but…” Miles said. “It’s late.”

“Obviously.”

“I also don’t mean to sound rude but—”

She shot him a furious look.

“Miles, as much as I appreciate your continuous concern, I’m fine.”

“What time do you have to be down tomorrow?”

“Early,” she grumbled.

“I understand why all of this is necessary, but it’s been going on long enough that now it’s almost dangerous.”

She groaned, resigned to pay full attention to him.

“It’s four am. I’m going to need you to be much more specific.”

He gulped audibly.

“The pushing past limits. It’s dangerous.”
“The situation won’t last for much longer, I can assure you that. And, like you said, it is necessary.”

He put a hand on the table, on top of the tank stuff, to get her mind off of it. To get her to look at him.

“Sir, we’ll figure out how to get fuel for the tanks when the tanks are done,” he said firmly. “We have bigger problems to deal with.”

She stood slowly, putting her hands on the table too.

“We have all to deal with.”

“Simultaneously,” he said, clearly judgmental of the concept.

“Indeed. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m done for tonight.”

Miles smiled. She was a tough nut to crack but he always got through, eventually. In most ways, his general acted like a cat that pretended not to be listening to you although they definitely were. Even if she listened just to get him out of her sight, it still worked for Miles.

“The problems will still be there in the morning,” he said, still grinning a little.

She stared at him. “So will I.”

Miles continued smiling, a curious gesture in a man of his stoicism and seriousness.

“Never doubted that, sir.”

“Do, and I’ll have disappointed you,” she said, right before bidding him goodnight.

It got on her nerves, how they acted around her in moments like this. She felt tempted to remind them how things were supposed to be, but she didn’t. At the end of the day, she was the first one to make sure they all got rest. It made sense, after so long, that the feeling was reciprocated to some extent.

Also, Miles had always been a little taken with her. That made her smirk to herself as she found her way back to her private bunk. There were only a few of those in the whole of Briggs, meant for the general in charge and the following ranks after her. Typically, none of those individual rooms would be occupied unless there came a senior officer, but she’d turned a blind eye and made a random selection and established a rotation. There were always empty beds in the common bunks so that in case someone of a higher rank ever visited Briggs the soldiers had somewhere to sleep while they vacated the rooms for the newcomers.

She hadn’t wanted a private room at first, and she certainly gave zero shits about using the communal bathrooms, but when she’d been appointed major general, the room came with the rank, and she’d accepted it out of honor for what she was going to do. Nobody had really cared much about that. They were all used to sharing sleeping spaces, either because they’d been at Briggs for years or because they were fresh out of the academy.

Truth was, she thought as she stripped herself out of the uniform quickly and got into bed, it was much easier to be an insomniac in an individual room than in one with fifty men snoring you didn’t want to accidentally wake up.

With the passing of days, Zinnia lost weight. She was already stepping in for her mother and
Anthony and her father. They all cooked side by side, preparing fish and salads and desserts that didn’t taste half as good as Iver’s to her, as she handed them kitchen utensils and ingredients, never actually cooking herself. She felt like a maid in a trial for a job, only this wasn’t exactly a test to see if she could do it; this was increasing the water temperature slowly so the frog in it wouldn’t leap away.

Her mother hadn’t mentioned anything specific. There had been no plea, no contract, just odd glances and the same severity under whose wings Zinnia had grown up.

She’d gone from supporting Zinnia’s claim of having her father go through the surgery to shrugging at the idea. And Zinnia had no idea what to do anymore. It felt like she was lost in the heart of a labyrinth with no real way out, and everybody kept telling her the same, that she shouldn’t have ventured into it unless asked to.

She wondered: Well, then hurry it the fuck up, because I know you’re going to ask.

Anthony kept reminding her of that single fact, that coming all the way here had been a terrible mistake and that she’d eventually pay for it, if she wasn’t already. But his words were gentle and he never made it sound like an assault, even if it always was.

“If I have to hear the words ‘you shouldn’t have come’ one more time, I’m going to—” she was complaining to Anthony. Once again, they were having the same old conversation, and she was looking for loopholes in impossible places.

“You shouldn’t!” he told her.

They were both speaking quite loudly much too late into the night. But Zinnia didn’t have it in her now to tell him to lower his voice.

“Then why do I feel like I did?” she rebuked.

She walked through the dark corridor in her parents’ house towards her bedroom, and Anthony followed. Neither were trying to be quiet.

“Because you feel guilty. You always have. You run off without a heading, of course you feel guilty.” Zinnia’s feet stopped moving, her back turned to Anthony. She heard him open his mouth, then close it, like a fish gaping outside of the water. Who was he—who was anyone—to psychoanalyze her? His hand found hers. Gently, he intertwined her fingers with his and spoke for the first time in a tone that matched the late hour. “Hey, I would too, I guess. I would have come back too.”

Zinnia turned around to face him.

“I know what she wants, Anthony,” she said. “We all know. Me, here. Me, here, at the precise moment.”

He shook his head.

“This isn’t the precise moment.”

“Like hell it is. I’ll go to Central, I’ll get the best doctors and I’ll just force him to go through with it. I’ll find my dad company and I’ll help my mother hire someone too, and it’ll all be alright.” And then I’ll run as fast and as far as I’m desperate to right now.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. It didn’t get much more desperate than this.
“How much money are you earning up north?” he asked softly.

He was not moving, was he? He’d stand there looking at her like she’d just committed a crime without meaning to, and he wouldn’t let her pass until he knew she’d be fine.

“Enough,” she stated. If she said it like she meant it, it’d be closer to the truth than it really was.

But Anthony saw that truth in her eyes, gleaming. He didn’t seem to want to leave her hand alone, and she didn’t ask him to either.

“How much, Zin?” he whispered.

“They need help, and I’ll get it for them, alright?” she said, moving her hand away from his and heading back to her bedroom. Her footsteps were loud against the floor. “And then I’ll go and I’ll find another job and it’ll be fine.”

“Or… you could stay.”

She was glad he was right behind her so she couldn’t see his face when he’d said that.

“I’m not staying,” she muttered. “I’m not meant to stay.”

Zinnia had never known how true that was, but she felt this was pretty much as close as she’d ever get to it.

“You could… I don’t know, I don’t know, you could try.”

He let her walk away, then, and he followed.

When they finally got to her bedroom, they sat down on her bed where they’d also sat years ago, when they’d been young and foolish and life had offered them time to figure things out.

Now it was do or die, do or other people get hurt, don’t and you’ll regret it.

Zinnia didn’t turn on the lights. There was enough moonlight filtering in through the glass to read Anthony’s face like a book.

“Did you figure things out with that girl?” she asked, changing the subject. She didn’t feel like talking about running with the main interested party in never letting her run again.

“No. I told you, she didn’t love me back.” He sighed. “It’s a hard habit to break, apparently.”

At first, Zinnia couldn’t believe it was about that. But, then, of course, she realized part of Anthony’s ties to her were and would always be about that.

She looked up at him and tried to maintain eye contact.

“I did break it,” she replied. “I broke it, and then I didn’t. And you keep getting the order wrong,” she muttered, incapable of looking at him anymore. She’d broken more than just Anthony’s old habits; she’d also inadvertently broken his heart and would continue to for as long as they both lived. Was it her fault, though? Did she have any agency at all? Could she really have nurtured her love for him longer than she had?

He let his orange hair fall in his face, and spoke again, so she didn’t really have to answer her own questions.
“I know,” he said. “I’m… sorry. I should really go now.” Anthony kissed her forehead once he’d stood to his feet, towering over her. “I know you have to as well. I just—I keep wishing you didn’t.” He exhaled. “Does that make me selfish? I guess it does.”

“Well, me too,” she replied. “I leave because I want to. There’s nobody waiting for me over there.”

That, too, carried more truth than she was ready to accept.

And the people here who waited all these years just did it out of self-interest, she thought, like me.

Anthony smiled sadly at her, gently squeezing at her shoulder.

“Go to bed, Zin…” he mumbled. “It’s been a long couple of weeks.”

“Yeah. You too. And… thank you.”

Before he left, one hand on the door’s frame, he turned around and smiled at her.

“Anytime.”

Zinnia watched the empty space he’d left behind for a few seconds, then she forgave herself for the part she’d played in it, and she got under the thin covers.

Nobody was—really—waiting for her there up north. Iver would always end up finding a replacement for her, Lynna could find another tenant, Candie would get by on her own like she always had. The north certainly wouldn’t miss a foreign flower from the south.

Minutes passed, and the ceiling remained the same dull gray as ever. The windows at Briggs were so small and round barely any light came through at night, but that didn’t really matter. There would’ve had to be some movement outside in the valley, some car passing by—anything—for Olivier to have been soothed by it, as it had happened in her youth, in the buoyant activity of the capital.

She still remembered her sleepless nights at Central, and the quiet that was always eventually interrupted by a runaway car. She’d lived far enough from the center of the city that it was a bit of an event when her staring at the ceiling and walls became, for a few seconds, a show of lights.

Up here, you only had the silence to cling to, snores in the distance, maybe. She felt each and every one of those little sounds inside her, and they both lulled her to sleep and kept her alert.

Briggs had a spy in their midst. Incapacitated and half-blind and with more wounds already than Olivier could count. Two weeks had brought along too many cuts, too many unanswered questions.

Too many days that’d she’d only tasted the almost summer-like sun in the patrols around the wall’s perimeter.

Olivier sat up on the rigid mattress and looked up at the tiny patch of dark sky she had access to from there.

She would fall to pieces if she kept sleeping this little, working so hard. Where were those days when she’d been allowed to take a small break every day to feel the real northern sun on her face? They felt so distant, almost as much as her past in Central.

She kept herself from smiling in bitterness.
How can you miss that? You have much better things to regret losing… she thought. Flashes of pinkish white and green grass and the smell of big cities came to her for a second, then… all she could taste in her mouth was the desserts down at Iver, the sun in her hair, and the main street, never as empty in her memory as it had been the last time she’d been there. Will my absence be noted? She allowed herself to wonder, but she already knew the answer. If the flower girl was already back, she wouldn’t be missing Olivier, she’d be busy enough selling her stories again.

The sky was a beautiful shade of dark blue, almost purple at the edges. Dawn would break in a few hours, and Olivier would need to be up by then. Up, alert, and ready. Ready to slice her sword across Esfir’s skin once again.

Buccaneer’s words resounded in her mind again. This couldn’t go on much longer, no…

Zinnia couldn’t sleep. Usually she was out in no time, but lately she’d been having trouble with it. Too much to do, no right way to do it, and people shouting at her that she was doing it all wrong anyway.

Her mother didn’t want her here now, but wouldn’t take too long to ask her to stay. Every doctor she’d consulted in town had said Zinnia’s father’s knee wasn’t in such a bad condition that would impair his life, even if he’d have some reduced mobility and would probably need help with the house chores. Tell me something I don’t know, she’d thought.

Everybody had looked at Zinnia in that moment, and she’d wanted nothing more than to have the earth swallow her whole, leaving no trace behind of her existence.

Should she sacrifice her life, her aspirations, her fears, in order to save the family business from mediocrity?

“You know what’s at stake here, don’t you?” her mother had asked. She’d hugged her the minute she’d come in, but Zinnia felt in her heart that it wasn’t a welcome hug, it was a ‘thank you for staying’ hug coated in expectations, not wishes. “We wouldn’t survive on the butchery alone if I reduce my work hours.”

“No one’s asking you to,” Zinnia had said. “I can send money. And Anthony already said he’d help, didn’t he?”

Her mother had held her hands in hers.

“We’ll sort that out when it’s time. For now, I think your father’s fine enough to be like this. It’s what he wants.”

“Just because he’s terrified of a small operation?”

“It’s what he wants, I will respect that. I haven’t, not always, but I will now.”

And how about what I want, mum? Does that even count? Zinnia had thought, but she already felt bad enough like this, she didn’t have to say it out loud.

“So?” Zinnia asked in the end.

“So we pull through.”
“And if he falls and breaks something?”

“It’s not going to happen. We’ll find someone to help us with the house.” Her mother’s smile had said it all. Zinnia had felt so small, so helpless. Selfish.

“Anthony,” she’d said, but her mother had shook her head.

“Not him. He’s already helped enough, he has a life.”

Her eyes had said ‘you, you will have to be here, pay us back for everything we’ve given you’. But what about my life, mum? Zinnia had wondered. What about all our lives?

“In that case, I’ll talk to all my old friends, just in case.”

Her mother had made a small noise at ‘old’, and a face Zinnia did not like one bit.

“I saw that girl, Dew, in the butchery. She did not ask about you.”

Zinnia had looked away. Kisses in the shade of the trees that never were, lies, breathlessness, words that had frozen a friendship that for a second could’ve become something else…

And her mother had just summarized it, cataloged it as ‘that girl’. Months of pining, months of ‘I love you’ that was never said out loud. Months of support Zinnia had sorely needed and asked for, and never truly gotten from her mother. That girl…

“No, she wouldn’t have…” Zinnia had muttered. The way things had ended, it was the best for all involved that life went on in silence. Dew hadn’t really looked in Zinnia’s direction in years, and now she went to her family’s butchery? Maybe her mother was lying. Maybe Dew was over it…

“If you keep running away, Zinnia—” Her mother always said her name like a command. “—it’s no wonder people do that. People forget, you know? Not everybody can wait for you forever.”

Zinnia hadn’t said anything to that. Her mother, of course, didn’t have the whole story, and never would. Zinnia hadn’t left Central because of a failed love story, she’d left because she couldn’t let failure and grief keep her anchored forever to a place she knew she didn’t belong in.

Her mother hadn’t asked her to stay yet, but Zinnia was already expecting the low blow to hit her. Her dad might not be in a terrible condition, and the circumstances weren’t what her mother had hoped they would be, yet it was still a fixed event. Nothing would change that woman’s mind. She would ask it of Zinnia.

And Zinnia needed to have a reply ready, just like she had with Anthony.

I won’t stay. I want to go back to another place I might quit in a few months, she’d say if she had the guts. She wondered, lying atop the covers in her bed because of the heat, if her mother would disown her after she said that. Probably not, someone would have to take care of the business after she and her husband were gone.

That only made Zinnia wish she would be disowned, after all.

How sad, she thought, sighing as she looked at the ghosts of the stars in the sky that the pollution kept better hidden than up north, that my own family, who wants me to stay, can’t make me feel like they want me here for me…
How sad, indeed, that she also had no idea if she should stay and give up on herself for something bigger than her own life, or go back and pursue something she’d never be faster than.

Her rational mind knew staying to help was the right thing, but if she could help from afar, sending money every week or so and making sure her family was taken care of, why couldn’t she be allowed to go back to the mountains and the chilly air and the cattle and the terrible food and the soft smell of dusty books in the morning and the scent of the bakery in the main street and the sun bathing every bit of cobblestone and all that blue all around …?

She had to find someone to hire at home, and she had to do it fast. She would fall to pieces if the situation continued. This couldn’t go on much longer.

Chapter End Notes

Currently stuck writing Chapter 21 (a monster of a chapter, too long to edit at once) and giggling every time I work on previous chapters because I love these two women more than I even should and my own inside jokes still make me laugh.

Also, I'll be reaching 100k words in the draft soon and can you not feel my absolutely ridiculous excitement about it?? :D
Bared to the bone

Chapter Notes

posting a bit ahead of schedule because I won't be able to on Thursday ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Strike. “You’re weak!” Strike. “And you’re—” Strike. “—soft! And that’s no way to win, Mauser.”

“Not expecting to win, General,” Mauser croaked with some effort.

She moved, not without certain velocity, but mostly with confidence she’d hit her target. Precision was not important as long as she had aim, and she did. By the bucket load. No matter how hard Mauser tried to hit her, she wasted minimal energy, jumping to the side and initiating her own attack before he could register her moving. She had already interiorized how much to use up and how to conserve the rest for the final blow. But today she seethed through her sword in a way that wasn’t common in her, as if the weapon had become a channel for her darkest, strongest emotions.

Mauser was only still standing because he feared that if he failed to protect himself against her, she’d decapitate him in a clean swift motion. Such was her usual level of containment that he didn’t understand how he’d ever been foolish enough to fear her before this particular training session. Today, the entire world would have bowed to her feet. And they would have been right to.

Her footwork, impeccable, made it seem as if she moved like a beam of light across the universe, her steel clacking against Mauser’s over and over. If she pushed a little harder, she’d succeed in throwing her opponent to the ground.

“Where’s your courage, soldier? Come at me!” she was shouting.

His hand shook holding the sword. Olivier clenched her teeth. She could’ve won this much sooner, but now was the right moment. She’d tired him out to the point that he would quit on his own in a few minutes if she let him.

Her own limbs hadn’t begun to tremble yet, and her breathing was regular, if a little heavy. Good to know she hadn’t lost that much practice in the years of abundant paperwork and little activity.

Taking a few steps back, she lifted her sword and waited for what would be his last attack. When it came, she only had to move elegantly to the side, slap his weapon out of the way with her own, and let him stare at her in disbelief, painting loudly.

Her chest rose fast and with ease. She felt full inside for a moment. Then she remembered and her frown returned, and as did that ugly tension in her muscles that few things would ever manage to make disappear in its entirety.

She threw her long hair back, away from her face.

“It’s been an honor, as always, General,” Mauser panted.

“I’m hoping one day it won’t be,” she told him on her way out of the training room. He gaped at her, unsure of whether it’d been a compliment.
She’d been trying to teach him how to properly swordfight—the Armstrong way—for years now. The day he finally succeeded in beating her, then she’d consider it a true honor. For now, it was nothing but a waste of time, even if it was a waste of time she sorely needed.

There was much to do.

She sat down at the bench near the communal showers after Mauser and her had fought. Getting some action, even if it was fabricated and deeply useless, felt better than standing in her office trying to find a way around things now that things, properly, were over.

Olivier discharged her closed fist on the bench. She fractured the wood and looked at the cracks for a few moments, partly wishing to touch it with her fingertips and feel the pain as if it were hers.

She should’ve done the same thing with the spy’s bones, crack them one by one, question after question. Olivier should’ve brought hell down on the Drachman’s head, for all it was worth.

But no. She’d been lenient, and she’d measured her actions. And now all her chances at outsmarting the neighboring country lay in a slapdash ditch away from Briggs.

Too many days of uninterrupted agony, Olivier supposed. The human body would only last for so long, would only take the pain for so many nights.

On the fifteenth night, Olivier had paid a short visit, asked her three questions again, and dug her sword a little into the spy’s old wounds. This would have normally elicited at least a groan or two from the woman, but she had not moved. Her body was limp and cold against the wall. Olivier had knelt to check her pulse, and she did find it—weak and slow, but still there.

“Are you going to talk?” she’d said.

The Drachman woman had murmured some words Olivier didn’t catch. Her Drachman was limited, if anything. Besides, the words were uttered too close together and much too feebly for her to understand them.

“Are you going to talk or not?” she’d repeated.

The spy had cracked a half-smile. Her breathing was… not regular.

For the first time in two weeks, English was what came out of her chapped lips:

“Now you’ll never know, Armstrong…” she’d whispered.

A minute later, the spy’s messy breathing had stopped.

And those scarce words she’d finally said were not nearly enough. It meant Drachma knew who Olivier was, but who didn’t? And it meant there was a plan, didn’t it?

Olivier had spent the following hours drafting strategies over and over, circling new weak spots in the border, all of which she’d need to discuss with Miles in the morning.

She knew she should be considering spy programs at this point, too. But she couldn’t risk it. She wouldn’t send any of the veterans here, and she’d be a fool if she even thought of sending the newbies.

She’d come to the top levels of the wall, when dawn had broken, to feel like her body was still capable of progress. In any way, shape, or form. And training against Mauser never disappointed.
Now what? Now they had no leads. The same fog as always clouded the border, and the only thing they knew for sure was that Drachma was plotting something, just like them.

Olivier took off her black t-shirt and removed the binding underneath which she only wore for practicality during training, loose enough so it wouldn’t hurt to exercise in, and she crumbled it all in her hands. She took off her boots next, but she didn’t get rid of any more clothing. She just… stayed there for a little while, thinking things she wished she’d never have to say out loud. Nobody would have the stomach for them, not even those soldiers who’d been on raids with her, years ago when there was still an official war going on.

The few men who were walking in the showers to clean themselves up as well took one good look at her on that bench, half-naked and sitting like she’d accidentally gotten one half of the world killed in gunfire, and knew today was no time for the usual jokes.

Zinnia slapped a few printed pieces of paper onto the table where her mother was finishing her breakfast.

“What’s this?” her mother said, looking up at her in mild disinterest.

“I found someone who’s willing to help you and dad. There’s his contact details.”

Ever since their last conversation, it’d taken Zinnia a little digging around and even more asking people directly, but she’d found a few candidates willing to work at the Erwin household for a medium pay—people who, like it’d been her case in Iver, needed a bit of stability to get going.

This one in particular was a forty-year-old man who worked near Anthony’s electricity tower. Zinnia had ever spoken with him, but he had kind eyes.

“This… costs money,” Zinnia’s mother said. “I hope you’re aware of that little fact.”

Zinnia nodded, perfectly calm. This was something objective, not a plan to be discussed, and she wouldn’t allow it to become so. Her bag was already packed in her room.

“I’ll be sending you all that I earn, so you can pay for this. I also paid to have dad signed up for surgery next Thursday. Central Hospital, the one for civilians.” For reason, that felt like an important enough thing to note. Her family had little contact with the medical world; she didn’t want them to accidentally go to the one that was military only.

“And all we need to know is in there, I imagine?” her mother said, pointing at the papers.

Zinnia crossed her arms over her chest.

“That knee won’t go untreated, not on my watch.”

Her mother scoffed. “It’s not your watch.”

“No, it’s yours. But you won’t bulge, so I’ll have to.”

“Zinnia…”

“No,” Zinnia almost shouted. “I know what you want. I know it’s the right thing to do, to stay here and help while being here.” Still trying to go for calm and collected didn’t seem to be working much. Her voice threatened to take over her self-control, it’d been breathed life on. She grew a size bigger
every time she finished a sentence. “But I can’t play that game. I can’t play by your rules, and I
would play by dad’s but I know all of his come down to fear.” She exhaled. “So I’ll play by mine.”

“What in the hell makes you think you can just ditch responsibility in this?” her mother spat back at
her.

“The fact that we’re all grown!” Zinnia said. “The fact that you didn’t want to call unless it was to
share terrible news! I left five years ago. My name isn’t in the house’s deeds anymore, I’ll only inherit
if you state it on a will, I left. And I’m only here because I refuse to have to leave the way I left back
then. And I refuse to feel guilty about it.”

Her mother stared back at her for a few moments in which the only thing Zinnia could hear was her
own heart pounding unceremoniously against her ribcage. Each beat carried a disproportionate
weight of worry and stress. What if this went south and her mother acted on her authority? What,
then?

“You’re a selfish little brat,” her mother said, seemingly less upset. But she definitely was not about
to begin using motherly words. “You’ve always been. That man you’re abandoning raised you too
soft, made you believe your rules are the only ones which prevail.”

“You’re wrong. He raised me as best he could. And here I am, moving things along. Can’t say the
same for you.”

Deep down, Zinnia had interpreted things as being such for years. How much more obvious could
something be that she’d continue to overlook it? Her father had done all the raising in the Erwin
household, at least the most important parts of it. Zinnia’s mother, on the other hand, had provided
money and stability, but never emotional comfort, she’d never laid the foundations for all the learning
Zinnia would someday have to do on her own.

And, of course, Mrs Erwin didn’t want to face that truth. “You’re running. That’s what you’re
doing.”

“This isn’t my home. You can’t force me to be here. I don’t want to!”

Her mother stood up with a loud thud to meet her eye.

“Oh come on, you’re behaving like a child,” she shouted.

One started letting their voice get shriller, wilder, and soon enough the two of them were
participating in a verbal war no one could win. There always came a point when screaming didn’t
mean you’d won, just that you’d made the other person lose interest in screaming back.

Zinnia took a deep breath. Her mother’s eyes were dark, like her own, but not a comforting shade.
They oozed severity, and a lack of understanding that Zinnia wished she’d never mistaken for blind
determination.

“Well, I’m not one. I love you two. I always will. But I won’t be a housemaid. And I will not be a
butcher. And I can do all that and still help, in my own way, in my own terms, and that’s what I’m
going to do.” In spite of Zinnia’s efforts to speak clearly, it all came out at once, really fast, loud—a
sign that this terrified her more than she’d been willing to admit.

But it wasn’t her mother that made her feel frightened. It was herself, her conflicts, her aspirations.
Her doubts.

It was the fault of ‘what should I do?’. A question without a right answer.
“Then what? You fix things here and you run away again? Do you think your father won’t miss you? Do you think that knee of his hurts worse than knowing his only daughter is gone?”

“Dad understands. I hoped you’d one day be able to as well, but maybe I was wrong.”

Mrs Erwin’s usually so stoic face, blotchy and red by now, suddenly lost all composure. A few tears adorned the bags under her eyes. “It’s your duty to be here! It’s your duty to stay with the family, to ensure the blood line goes on.”

“Blood line? Blood line?” Zinnia shouted. Then she paused. That was the last straw. “I’m not grandchildren insurance, mum. I left, and I’m leaving again. And I’m sorry you can’t see why. It’s in your hands now, I’m done.”

She stormed out of the room and didn’t look back. In a few minutes, she’d be gone. And no matter what obscenities her mother meant for her to hear, Zinnia was done listening to what she should do coming from other people’s mouths.

On her way to her bedroom to grab her things and take off, though, she noticed her father was sitting on his bed, trying to get his socks in without bending too much.

Zinnia smiled to herself. He was always so careful with those, he always said he couldn’t walk happily if he knew one sock was mismatched or slightly off while his foot was in it.

The look he gave her when she got in, leaving her suitcase by the door, broke her heart.

“You heard, didn’t you?” she muttered.

His eyes weren’t just sad, she could’ve swallowed any hint of sadness, but they also shone with love. A love so deep Zinnia felt this was wrong, leaving him again was wrong.

“She misses you too, you know?” he reminded her.

“I know.” Zinnia said, sitting next to him. “But this was no way of showing it.”

“You really think she wanted to use all of this to get you back here?”

She shook her head.

“It doesn’t matter what I think.” With a sigh, she forced herself to smile. For him. “You’re getting that piece of bone over there healed up soon, and I found a hard-working man a few streets back who’s going to help around here or at the shop.”

‘For him’ was such a wholesome reason to do things, if only it always worked. ‘For him’ meant he’d be the one to suffer less, not that he’d find the situation harder.

But it was, wasn’t it? There was never anything pleasant or nice in having to undergo surgery.

“Oh god…” he mumbled, closing his eyes.

“Dad, I know you’re scared, just…” Zinnia licked her lips, thinking as hard as she could. There would never be any words that would work. Honesty, perhaps, would neutralize his apprehension a little, but never enough. “Please. They’ll sedate you. You won’t feel a thing.”

When he opened his eyes again, they met hers. The wave of guilt returned to her.

“It will be worse after the sedation wears off.”
She felt tears threatening to come out and ruin her calm façade, but they never overspilled. She’d trained them well. They were still there, though, lurking in the corner of her eye, waiting for the right moment.

She said, almost too choked up to sound breathy:

“Oh, but you’re a tough man, aren’t you?”

“Life made me tough. Now I’m afraid I got soft.”

He smiled at her, and that was, without one single doubt, the most heart-wrenching second of her life—seeing those lips stretch until he was beaming at her, like when she used to complete all the tasks he told her to, or when she recited all the constellations to him after finding their names in a book. Only this was in no way an accomplishment he should be proud of.

Gently, he put an arm around her, and she put both her own around him.

“I miss you, Zin,” he said. “I never want you to forget that.”

“I won’t.” She kissed his cheek, wishing the tears away with all her might. She didn’t want to breathe, in case they escaped.

“But you have to run free. You’ve always been so good at that, I was always so proud…”

He began to tear up a little, the tears falling onto her dress. His voice was already a thread of both joy and the darkest of sorrows. When she’d left to explore the forest around their hometown, she always came back, her brown hair in the wind, with that beautiful shiny smile on her face that she always managed to share with him. She’d come to the butchery, sit down in a stool next to her dad, and he’d ruffle her hair and tell her to start putting together the story of her last adventure because he and the world couldn’t wait to hear. He’d made a writer out of her when she still was nothing but a scrawny kid with insatiable curiosity.

“I don’t know if I can be brave…” he admitted, a few seconds after.

“Seventy years without an injury or a cut to heal… damn you, dad. It’s not even dangerous surgery. And it won’t hurt, after that. I mean, only for a little while.”

“Pain doesn’t scare me.”

“Then what?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, curiously. “It’s just… like a tug, something tugging at me in the opposite direction.”

“Yeah…”

At this point, if he’d asked, Zinnia would have made the choice to stay. For him. But he loved her, and she knew he’d never ask it of her knowing how she felt about it.

God, that didn’t make it easier in the slightest. She appreciated her mother now, for that burning sincerity in wanting her there. Her father wouldn’t require anything of Zinnia, even when she was about to do the opposite thing she’d been telling him to. She was following the tug against wind and tide. How could she find the courage to convince him to do what she wasn’t able to?

“Sometimes you have to listen to that,” he said. “I like to.”
“Not this time.” She was about to play the most cowardly and desperate move of her life. She begged for heaven or whatever was next to forgive her for it. “Will you go? For me,” she said.

‘For him’ sometimes took the shape of ‘for me’. Because he loved her, because he wouldn’t ask her to stay, because he wouldn’t be able to let her go without reassuring her he’d be okay after.

“You won’t be there to hold my hand,” he said, as a sad realization, surprised.

“No, I’ll be somewhere far.” Zinnia had started to cry now too, in the most absolute of silence. A sob out of place would feel wrong, like she was the one being left behind. She felt so selfish, she was. But she held him tighter anyway. “Running free.”

“Send me a postcard, at least,” he sobbed clearly now. “I never get to see the places you see.”

If only she’d shown him before, the lands she’d set foot on, the people she’d met. People with red eyes like his in small little villages, fields covered in flowers that always made her sneeze, women so stern her stomach fluttered a little at first, ruins older than the country they rested in… So many thing her eyes had hovered over, and she only had words to show for it, never a picture.

“That, I can do,” she muttered, tears streaming. “And I’ll write you a story on the back.”

An image and a thousand words, both.

He finally unwrapped his arms from around hers and he gave her the sweetest, most loving glance he had in store, like when she’d been a little kid with pigtails and a smile that could have opened doorways into the universe. She was and she would always be her father’s only child, a child of his heart more than of his body. A child he’d always protect, even when he didn’t need to.

“I love you, my flower,” he said, and for once—just this once—Zinnia accepted it. She would be a flower for her father.

“I love you too…” she mused.

“Now run. Run wild and free and run back if you ever get tired."

She laughed wetly. “I will. Bye, dad.”

After that, she went back to her tiny room to take one last look at the place she hadn’t really called her own in so long. This was goodbye.

She might come back one day, but never on someone else’s terms. She made herself that promise.

Then, she all but ran to Anthony’s workplace near the electrical tower. His messy breaks were untraceable, but she might as well just try. If she got lucky, then it’d be one less race for public transport.

And she did. Anthony gave her a ride to the core of Amestris, and even though he wasn’t supposed to be not working for that long (and despite her insistence), he parked and walked her to the ticket stand so she could get herself on a train.

Zinnia could have gone anywhere in the world, literally. She could cross the desert on her own, build up some more muscle, expand her lungs, learn to tolerate the heat. She could invade Drachma on her own, a single solitary soldier that reports back to nobody. She could travel past those countries surrounding her own. The entire planet was hers for the taking, and yet she felt there was only one place to return to, one place she’d been terrified to leave when she’d realized she might never be
going back.

The man behind the glass pointed behind her at a train that had begun to steam a while ago.

“That’s yours, miss,” he told her. “Leaving in two minutes.”

Zinnia gave a tiny start, and grabbed hold of her suitcase.

“Don’t be a stranger, okay?” she shouted at Anthony as she began to run so she could catch the train before it left. Her fingers caught a little when trying to get the door open, and for a second terror threatened to sink her stomach as well as her hope, but somewhere in the next heartbeat she’d pushed the heavy metal door open.

She made it, and once she’d taken a seat, she finally let all of her breath out, waved back at the silhouette of Anthony in the distance although he probably couldn’t see her.

And she felt freer than she ever had in a long time. She was going home.

Chapter End Notes

[actual note on my manuscript]: “It’s funny bc this is called ‘bared to the bone’ only in honor of the one-paragraph moment in which Olivier will be wearing nothing on the upper half of her body. That’s it, that’s the note”

for once, I went with the canon trope of naming military officers after actual military weaponry and researched Mauser’s name for ages even though he’s mentioned just a few times. Word building is too fun sometimes to skip it :D

also, at first I was going to make Zin’s dad be like sixty or so, but then I remembered that technically Buccaneer is sixty as well, and I had a bit of trouble imagining those two as being the same age, so... seventy it is XD. Having decided this, of course, led to creating a very unnecessary backstory that won’t make it into the actual fic but that my Writer Brain finds very entertaining. so he had Zin at almost forty or so, did he marry Mrs Erwin before or after? is she of Ishvalan origin as well? why did he move to Central? did he move there in times of war or of peace? SO MANY QUESTIONS, Writer Brain!!
When she loved me

Chapter Notes

Today's chapter is all about flashbacks :D

I love Dew and Ianthe so much, honestly, I need to write something with them as protagonists one day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She fell asleep on the train, drowned in memories of times long past and times so recent she had to close her eyes to keep at bay.

That girl... her mother had said. She did not ask about you...

But the thing is... she’d used to.

They used to ask about each other, if they didn’t coincide along the day. Dew would always come to Zinnia’s house and they’d both lie down on the wooden floors and take turns playing with the Erwins’ cat.

Dew came and went like a ghost, but the impact she had on Zinnia’s life was a lot more tangible. Little touches, words that could’ve dried up the entire ocean or refilled it with rose water, and all those hours spent at the line drawn between everything and nothing.

Anthony always hated Zinnia a little for pursuing this, he was still hurting, mourning something she’d gotten over so much faster than him. Their friendship suffered during those times, but it never truly faded, even if it never healed either.

To be honest, she forgot that he, along with the rest of the world, existed as long as Dew was around. Dew, who liked her but never in the right way, who never said a word about it until it’d been years and she was already off with someone else while Zinnia still counted the hours there were left until she’d be gifted with her presence again, until she had a chance to be the next item in her to-do list.

That girl... Zinnia’s mother had said. She hadn’t been just any girl.

“I was always a little in love with you,” Dew told her one day, sitting on the stone steps of someone else’s house. They didn’t care about that, then, excusing themselves on a youth that wasn’t theirs to live anymore. They were no longer teenagers who didn’t know any better.

‘Was’, Dew had said. Never had a verb tense hurt more.

Zinnia asked, more hopeful than she knew how to be: “And now?”

Now, Dew was dating someone else. Someone taller and better-looking who had known how to pursue her, how to show their love for her without hesitation. Someone who had come at the right time and had seen no reason why to wait.

Dew shook her head softly. Now, Zinnia was a memory, a daydream of what could have been and never was. Perhaps, in the right light, if it was late enough, Zinnia could still be the spark that had
never caught fire.

“I’m sorry.”


Dew chuckled nervously. “You kind of did.”

“So you always knew, then?”

“No, I just—maybe.” Dew looked away. Zinnia’s heart broke at the same time it pounded, because what was about to come next was something that should be uttered face-to-face, not in hiding. “Sometimes… sometimes I wish you’d spoken up about it sooner, so I could’ve—”

Zinnia understood at once, without need for more. ‘So I could’ve…’, there’d never been any possibility, never. Never any sign that this was even lightly reciprocated.

And now it turned out it had been? And it’d failed because neither of them had told the other?

“How about you had spoken up sooner too? I wasn’t the only one with feelings!” she almost shouted. “You can’t just say it’s my fault and move on with your life like I’m not only now hearing about this!” Zinnia hid behind laughter, but it was not the honest kind.

If Dew was allowed to conceal her face by looking away, so could she.

“I didn’t say that,” Dew said, calmly. She was always the calm one, appealing to rationale and facts and never doing introspective work to realize her truth wasn’t universal. “But… it’s true. You were the one… you were always the one to flirt openly and hug me for minutes and… and… I don’t know, Zinnia.” For a second or two, their eyes did meet now. “I waited. I waited because I thought you were going to tell me.”

“So when I didn’t you just, what, decided you wouldn’t either?”

“I didn’t know what to do!” Dew cried out.

“Me neither.” Zinnia’s words sounded like an ultimatum. “But now I do.”

She stood up, looked at the woman she had loved longer than she could remember, and began walking away.

“Where are you going?” Dew asked, probably confused and feeling sorry. That had never been addressed till then, the confusion. And if it ever was to its fullest extent, it’d be hard on them both. Maybe that’s why they’d never dealt with it.

“To take a walk,” Zinnia replied. She turned around. She would look into Dew’s eyes one more time, to say this and let her know she meant it: “I’m sorry, I just… I know you don’t feel the same, but I still love you, okay? And it hurts. And for now I think I need to let it hurt a little.”

Then Zinnia walked away, never meaning it to be a permanent retreat, but it seemed that was how Dew had understood it. And after that, well, it had been hell. Silence and avoiding each other’s eyes. A friendship that already was and something else that could have been, all broken beyond repair because no matter their age, they’d never grown out of the small town life that had made children out of them for years.
Zinnia was waken up by the sun, irritatingly bright against her closed eye lids. Around the moving train, a sea of grass spread towards the horizon, so they must still have been in the Central Area.

It’d been years since she’d… given a thought—a real one—to what had happened. It no longer hurt like a fresh jellyfish sting but… Zinnia still remembered the pain. Loving without being loved was terrible on its own, but finding out that there had been a very specific moment during which it would have been mutual loving the very day you also find out the other person blames you for it never happening… Zinnia had wanted to run that day, and she would have had no problem in admitting to it that time.

She wondered, was coming back to Iver the same as taking that walk? Was she just putting distance between herself and reality because it hurt too much? Or was this instinctual? Did she really have such important ties to the north to return there? Or did she just… want the illusion of being away? Would she want to run away from there too as soon as she arrived?

She arrived, and she went straight to Candie, who hugged her like a mother should hug a child and told her she’d pay her for the days she’d been away, in spite of Zinnia’s insistence.

Then, the older woman smirked at her.

“Your general came by some time ago, asking about you,” she said.

Zinnia immediately wished the earth to swallow her whole and leave no trails behind of her disappearance.

“She’s nothing of mine,” Zinnia grumbled. “If anything, the client that’s always assigned to me because someone likes to play really mysterious games.”

Candie laughed and patted her shoulder.

“Welcome back, kid.”

Then Zinnia visited every shop in the main street, one by one. A single job wouldn’t pay for every single thing Zinnia needed money for now. And she was intent on delivering, every week on the dot, to shut her mother up. Selfish? Very. But she was free now and they’d be okay again.

Watch me rise above your expectations, that embodied her mood about it. She would not only rise above them, but thrive once she had.

The baker took her in the afternoons. She forgot for a moment where she was and almost began tearing up as soon as the man had said the word. He laughed, as it could have gone no other way. And she reminded herself that’s how things worked around here. Strength prevailed, the weak paved the roads for everybody else to walk on. Tears of joy weren’t all that common, after all.

If only she could trust them with the little fact that saved her from being weak… Back in Central, she’d wanted to cry so often that not having shed a tear out of place made her the strongest of them all.

She spent the few first hours back in Iver talking to Candie, then she donned an apron and went to her new job. After a few minutes of training on how to make bread and use the several gadgets in the place, Zinnia resigned herself to leaving every evening smelling like flour and cake frosting.

That would be the price for freedom. And as such, she’d pay it gladly.

Much to her surprise, that price was to be soon increased.
The day after being back, Zinnia realized she was back at full speed. To take life by the horns. And so it succinctly happened.

Olivier Armstrong walked in, and Zinnia almost didn’t recognize her. She’d known the woman was ferocious for months now, and she was accustomed to displays of power, which were pretty lowkey even then. The woman who made for the counter that afternoon broke every single measurement Zinnia had ever made of her.

Breaths were held when both their gazes locked. Zinnia was painfully aware that she had flour in her hair and was wearing an apron as unpleasant to the eye as Southy’s teeth.

“Fancy meeting you here.” Olivier’s smile was the widest Zinnia had ever seen it, and she didn’t trust it. “What? Did selling old books not pay off?”

Zinnia tightened her jaw and when she felt the temptation to do something very dishonorable, she tightened her fists as well.

“My family needs me to send them more money, that’s all.”

“Still living in the shadow of mum and dad?” Olivier said. She meant it as a joke, nothing meant to truly harm or even upset. Gods knew she was practically clapping with her ears right now. Two weeks gone, with all the absolute bullshit that had gone on meanwhile, and now the flower girl was back.

Zinnia glowered at her.

“My father is sick, they need the money,” she said simply, bitterly. No more information was required of her, so she didn’t give it.

“Oh.” Olivier’s throat and probably lungs too went completely dry. Even in this sun, that was unlikely.

Zinnia frowned.

“Now, do you actually want anything or do you just approach everyone in town without a real purpose because you’re bored?” Today she didn’t want to be toyed with. Or to play the game itself either. Today she wanted to be left alone, and she thought she was going to manage it in the end, but no. The fucking idiot in charge just had to come and ruin it, making her feel like a little girl.

That fact burned uncomfortably in Zinnia’s stomach. She hadn’t really processed the fact, earlier in the train, that coming back didn’t just mean freedom and a house to herself and not answering to people, but also this woman getting a say because that’s just how Zinnia had learned things were like in the north.

Because she hadn’t come here to argue, Olivier told Zinnia what she wanted, since the baker was nowhere in sight (probably at the back preparing more produce), and she left with a curt nod to sit in the sun, legs crossed under the table in that particular manner of hers. Ankle on the other knee.

Blue…

“Zinnia! Get the canopy down a little, it’s hot outside!” said her boss, interrupting her thought.

And with a grumble and a sigh, Zinnia walked outside to actually do as she was told.

Don’t look, Zin. Just keep on walking, she thought. Walk straight and don’t look at her.
But when Olivier’s hand wrapped—gently, truth be hold—around Zinnia’s hand, she stopped on her way, forgetting how ‘straight’ she was supposed to be standing right now.

“... hand wrapped—gently, truth be hold—around Zinnia’s hand, she stopped on her way, forgetting how ‘straight’ she was supposed to be standing right now.

“I apologize. About your father,” Olivier said. Not usual in her, but when it was earned, she would yield. Then— “I hope it’s nothing serious.”

At first, Zinnia couldn’t help but glaring. The lack of opposition in the other woman’s eyes destabilized her a little. Normally, there’d be an entire army in them ready to fight at the slightest provocation.

“Thank you,” she said simply, more in the vein of a hiss than anything else, but Olivier didn’t comment on it.

As Zinnia pulled down the canopy, Olivier spoke again:

“Will you be in the same place as always,” she asked, “now that you’re back?”

It was out there, so Olivier would honor her words and not take them back unless asked to. That doubt had corrupted her soul in the past few days, between the sleepless nights and the stress of having to torture someone for information. Better to have expressed it in a more or less correct way, if a little intense, than to go on making even more of an asshole out of herself with stupid remarks.

“I’m not going to write anymore,” Zinnia replied dryly, arms crossed tightly over her stomach. “So don’t worry, you won’t have to bother and personally check on what I do or don’t do anymore.” Her eyes met the general’s in the distance. “If that’s what you were even doing in the first place.”

**Bold. Fucking bold move, Zin.** One of the boldest of her life, and it was as if it hadn’t been. Olivier was still staring at her curiously, and … respectfully, strange as that was. She’d been away for two weeks, maybe just Zinnia had lost practice at reading Olivier’s expressions.

Calmly, the general uncrossed her legs and replied with something that her own heart—now pounding happily—classified as bold too:

“Maybe I like what you wrote.”

Maybe she did. She hadn’t really stopped to think of it as such before. She kept the things, mostly because they were trophies, nothing more. If they’d been mere banners she’d won, she would have made them public, probably roasted Zinnia’s naïve thoughts with the rest of her men.

Maybe she **liked** those writings. They weren’t specially good, or poetic, or artistic—not that Olivier was that much caught up with art these days—but they were brutally honest. And that, she was fluent in.

Maybe Olivier hadn’t thrown them away yet because she liked seeing herself through foreign eyes, the eyes of a girl who reeked of cities and wealthier lives than the north could offer her. She liked what that girl saw: the mountain, the much feared general, the impenetrable wall that kept so many away and always would… but also, in a way, Zinnia had managed to see the woman. Not the heir to a rich family, not the soldier who’d climbed up the ranks on merit alone, not even her natural leadership capabilities. No, Zinnia had seen the simplicity of the person beneath all that. Zinnia had seen the puzzle and broken it apart to dissect it, then hand over the results of her observations to the object of them. And maybe the flower girl wasn’t even aware of what she’d done?

Maybe. Did it have to be about liking them at all?

“**Maybe you just wanted to see me burn at the stake or something.**”
“Contrary to popular belief, I don’t burn people alive.”

“No,” Zinnia spat. “You do worse things.”

“Yes, I do,” Olivier admitted softly. Because it was true. Because she had done much more terrible things in order to get what she wanted, and she hadn’t even succeeded in the first place.

“So,” Zinnia exhaled. “Like I said. I release you from your duty. Or whatever…” And she went back inside to work, clearly signaling that the conversation was over.

Olivier stayed for a couple more minutes, left the usual money aside to pay for her food, and took off. Also contrary to popular belief, she knew how to take a ‘no’ for an answer.

Drachma, patrols, shortage of men, the tank, alkahestry, war. All pieces of the same puzzle. And all just amounted to the same things: uncertainty and long headache-inducing hours sitting on the same spot. What needed to be done brought along the greatest discomfort of not wanting to remain sitting down for a prolonged amount of time at the time that she wanted to be doing something else, something active.

What needed to be done was honorable, but infuriating because of the scarce advancements. The Drachman spy was dead and had died the same way she’d lived, quietly; no patrol ever saw any sign of the enemy at all; and because of the war mentality that had invaded the fort, every man on Briggs was working double shifts. If the Drachman had sent spies, they weren’t just on the lookout anymore, if they’d ever truly been.

The border didn’t rest.

But Olivier had to. Appealing to her human condition, and because of Miles’ insistence, she sometimes stopped working. And she read.

She hadn’t read for pleasure in years.

And she read the only thing she shouldn’t. She read about herself, through the eyes of the person that by now Olivier had accepted would never write this kind of text again.

And as she read, the strings of adjectives used to refer to herself led her mind away from the present into the crazy turmoil of her own memories and thoughts. Her plans to attack, all of them failures.

She couldn’t help but think them over and over again. The patrols would report if something came up in the border, and eventually Central would send in more soldiers, fresh out of the academy, so the shortage wouldn’t remain a problem for too long. But… alkahestry?

Without books, she had little chance. She thought she’d accepted so as well. But she kept exploring the idea in her head that she might contact Ianthe’s family, because other than that she had no clue how to get in touch with anyone of Xingese origin. As far as she knew, there were no officers from Xing in the military, and if there were currently any envoys from the country in the east, Olivier had no way to find out.

And what she remembered about it was insufficient. Just like what Ianthe had known herself. Maybe, Olivier thought, this was why she hadn’t contacted her in all these years. She had no use left for their relationship now that the bittersweet end of it had turned fifteen years old this year, and if she went back to Ianthe she’d never find forgiveness for protecting her by taking off to the north. She
doubted she’d even be able to admit to that.

They’d hidden away in Olivier’s room from the superficial life at the Armstrong mansion. Ianthe’s face had lit up when she’d come in for the first time; they always went to her place instead, less scrutiny, more normalcy. They both felt right at home there.

But this room they were in was as big as Ianthe’s house, without the garden. It felt like walking into the room of a queen.

Once Olivier had gotten her past the initial astonishment, Ianthe had gone back to her usual levels of energy. She was no longer just big eyes ogling everything with insatiable curiosity, but all mouth, and all attitude. She was so loud, god… Olivier loved it. Loud and unapologetic. But this was her place, and everything needed to be quiet because otherwise it disrupted the royal aura.

She’d pay for it later, when Ianthe left. But for now she might as well just grab onto it. She’d deal with her parents after.

She and Ianthe talked about alkahestry again. Because Olivier hadn’t been quite content with the ‘abstract’ concept of it. ‘Abstract’ was a hard idea to grapple. It wasn’t like love. Love could be held, physically, if not in its entirety at least in some ways. Hugs, kisses, company. Sometimes those things were real expressions and manifestations of love. But alkahestry for now hadn’t been proven to be able to do the same, like alchemy did.

And the name it had to try and describe what it could do didn’t really clear anything up.

“The pulse of the dragon?” Olivier had said. “That sounds like one of those games kids play.” She’d been thinking of those old card games people had played in the streets when she got out of class.

Ianthe supported her weight on her elbow to look at Olivier right in the eye.

“Don’t mock it!”

Olivier held her gaze, then looked away.

“Sorry.”

“I’m serious. Would you stand by if someone spoke evil of the military?”

“Maybe.”

Ianthe laughed. “We all know how big of a lie that is.” Then she scoffed. “I can’t believe I’m in love with a soldier.”

“I’m not a soldier yet.” Olivier pointed out. She was going to be so, soon. Very soon. She was a girl in a world full of men, but in spite of everything unpleasant that came with it, she’d risen to the top of her class. And if she kept working at this pace, she’d graduate early. And she’d leave Central for once and for all.

She looked at Ianthe, longingly. What would she do about this when she was assigned to some distant headquarters somewhere? Ianthe wouldn’t come with her, would she?

Ianthe cupped her chin. She had short fingers, but she knew how to use them. One single touch from them and Olivier’s skin felt a thousand times more sensitive than normal.
“You are and you’ll always be,” Ianthe said. “And I haven’t always liked it but it’s a part of you I can’t just ignore. But I’m Xingese, and I will always be, so you shut up about cultures you don’t know and listen before you judge, okay?”

“Okay.” Serious, Olivier leaned towards Ianthe’s touch, like she was about to rise.

“You are a good soldier, Ms Armstrong,” she said. “Very good, indeed.” Her eyes were green and full of love, but also full of stories that needed to be heard. “But you need to learn some things.”

“Tell me more about it, I do want to learn.” Olivier always wanted to learn more, about everything. That trait had remained with her for many years after this. New information, though, had ended up becoming a weapon, not a step towards more introspective work.

Ianthe shrugged and lay back on the mattress.

“There’s not that much to tell. It’s, I don’t know, common knowledge. People are taught about the art of alkahestry, like alchemists here, I guess. But to most people it’s just a general belief, kind of like a faith?” She smiled. It was better than faith. “Does that make sense? Instead of believing the earth moves itself, they believe in the flow of life.”

“And what do you believe in?”

Another shrug. Ianthe’s denim straps always fell from her shoulders, her overalls were too big for her, yet she filled rooms with just her presence. Her words, after that, gave rooms light.

“I believe a little. My plants… they’re alive, just like us. I can feel that, sometimes, more than just believe it.”

Her little garden back at home was Ianthe’s pride and joy, Olivier knew. She had a connection to those plants, a pure stream of love that didn’t require reciprocity.

“And you? What does someone like you believe in?” Ianthe laughed at the thought. Olivier didn’t look like the kind of person who devoted herself to a faith, or a superior being. “Alchemy?”

Olivier wrinkled her nose, remembering Alex. The things coming out of the ground and the little blue sparks and the circles with annotations she didn’t understand. Their mother had wrinkled her nose at it, but she’d encouraged it all the same. A soldier and an alchemist, her boy had prospects. Olivier, though, was just a rich girl in men’s clothes to her.

“I’ve never believed in alchemy. I believe in what I can see with my two own eyes.”

“That’s the soldier speaking.”

Olivier thought about it. “Maybe so.”

“Widen those horizons, huh? There is so, so much more out there than meets the eye.”

It’s not like Olivier saw many horizons right now, she saw the walls around them. And she felt the softness, the thickness of the mattress under them. And she heard the house breathe in expectation.

She pulled one of those big smirks she knew made Ianthe smile right back, tough as she was.

“You’ve gone all Xingese on me.”

Immediately, Ianthe sat on the bed, moved like a resort. Loud, unapologetic. Olivier bit her lip.
“I swear to fucking god, Armstrong! Stop it with that, eh? It’s not funny. It’s racist.”

“It is. I’m sorry,” Olivier said, very serious because it had been definitely not the right thing to say. Maybe she shouldn’t say those things, why did she even feel the compulsion to anyway? Surely not all Xingese people spoke like philosophers, so… then why?

This was what Ianthe was asking her to learn, she’d learn it. She’d build a better world out of her own mistakes. One day, she’d travel back to Xing with Ianthe, they’d go over there like two queens, and silently Olivier would apologize to the land she’d mocked.

Then, she rested on her side and looked at Ianthe, reaching out to touch her face. Round and soft-skinned and pale. “And I will be stopping right away in favor of…” She moved a little closer, breathing close to Ianthe’s ear. “… much more entertaining activities.”

“Sometimes I hate you so so much, woman…” Ianthe mumbled, closing her eyes.

Olivier stopped for a second. “Do you, though?”

Ianthe sighed and pulled her closer. “Stop being so damn Amestrian and maybe I will hate you less.”

Olivier laughed out loud.

“Fair enough,” she said.

And the kiss that followed was her first silent apology. The first of many.

Olivier would have liked to think she’d become less Amestrian after all those years, more tolerant, more willing to listen and withhold judgment, but that was not what the flower girl’s words let through.

She sighed.

The honesty in those words equaled their lack of awareness.

Being called things she’d been hearing for years was no shock. The adjectives rolled right off her, and some of them she took great pride in. But being observed and being given some benefit of the doubt was extraordinary. And it made her feel like a child again, like the child she might’ve been if she’d been born up here in a normal family.

But it was also a reminder. Of what she should continue to be. The string of adjectives, the Northern Wall of Briggs. Work, research, lead. This small break shouldn’t have been allowed. Nor this self-indulgence of a life she’d been occasionally living.

Sometimes I wonder who she is, what she does. A general orders. A woman normally follows. It’s refreshing to see that turned around, but that is all that meets the eye. Is there more to know? I wonder sometimes. Is there someone beneath all that military blue? Someone worth knowing? I wonder…

Olivier sighed. She had answers to those questions, so similar and yet so different. Who she was, that was inseparable from the façade people saw. She was a general, and a woman general at that, with all the hard work and discrimination it entailed. But that was one level of many. She found it immature of Zinnia to think this way. Of course there was someone under all that blue. But if that someone would be worth getting to know… that depended entirely on her, not Olivier. And by the looks of it, Zinnia didn’t appear to be interested anymore.
And that ‘anymore’, a small and insignificant word in the order of things, felt like a tiny thorn against Olivier’s sternum.

A sudden but soft knock on the door brought her back to the reality she’d been trying to forget for a while. Olivier could tell it was Miles before he walked in. He’d been on the last patrol, and even if he didn’t come with news, he always came anyway and sat with her, working side by side because that made the silence less unbearable.

But this time, upon getting into the room, Miles’ eyes were very obviously directed at the pile of pieces of paper Olivier had been… reading. His face immediately got all red, and she noticed how big of an effort he was making not to laugh. Maybe that was why his skin now looked like the outside of a ripe apple.

“What’s so fucking funny?” she said, not bothering to be polite. If he saw, he saw. There were so very few conclusions he could come to, and yet… why would she mind? What could he say she hadn’t thought to herself already?

“Nothing, I just…” Miles actually grinned. Like a child. He then passed a hand over the back of his neck. “Glad to see you not working.”

“I was about to get to that now, sorry to disappoint,” she said. In fact, work could wait. But if she didn’t start immediately, he’d ask questions. It was odd enough he hadn’t directed a few at her already. “How was it?”

He sat down and sighed, taking off his coat. In this weather, it was warmer inside Briggs than on the outdoors. A fort had no breeze.

“Quiet. Deadly quiet. I would’ve expected a few men at the border, at least. But no one’s come looking for the … body.”

They’d buried the spy on the right side of the border, but hadn’t taken too many precautions to hide the slapdash grave. If the Drachman found it, all the better for them.

“We’ll need to be vigilant. They might send more numbers. Or—” Olivier laughed softly. “—they might just go ahead and declare war.”

“If they haven’t already, I don’t think they will soon,” Miles said, shaking his head. “Whatever they’re waiting for, it’s not time yet.”

But who knew what they were waiting for? They were just playing the same cat-and-mouse game as ever. And the only way to get ahead of them was keep eyes on the border at all times.

“In any case,” she said, “we’ll continue as always. Eventually something will come up.”

Miles smiled faintly.

“Buccaneer’s waiting for it like there’s no tomorrow,” he said. “Did you talk to him again?”

Olivier chuckled again. “No. Why? Did you?”

Of course, she imagined what he meant by mentioning Buccaneer. And she wondered if she should tell him about her plans for the captain.

“It’s not my place, sir.”
Olivier sighed.

“I told him he was to retire next year.” Her voice wasn’t nearly as thunderous as usual. This was no small matter. As far as she’d noticed, Miles and Buccaneer were as close as Briggs would allow two friends to get. And she’d never gotten a chance at asking him what he thought about this.

But Miles just guffawed. Olivier imagined the mental image of Buccaneer’s face when he’d been told his days in the military were over had been enough for Miles’ formality to just drop, even after a while.

“I’d send him out for a couple of weeks. That’ll make him appreciate retirement.”

“He won’t. And he’s not leaving Briggs either.” Olivier shook her head. “Stubborn old bear…”

“He’d come back with another arm chopped off.”

Most likely. Or a leg. And an even greater thirst for vengeance. He’d ask for her to send him out again, and again and again. Until he was all metal and rage. There’d be more flesh belonging to him on Drachman grounds than in Briggs.

Olivier’s eyes went right back to what she’d been reading, like that’s where they were meant to be. But she tried not to reread them, she already knew most by heart. She’d underlined some, even.

There’d be no more of these now. So some of the questions in them would be forever left unanswered.

Then, Miles asked, tentatively:

“Is something the matter between you and the … writer of those things?”

He was looking at the table that remained quite covered in texts.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Olivier replied, but she’d said so without looking up from them as she put a few away and fished out the paperwork, and there Miles had his answer.

Chapter End Notes

"That girl… Zinnia’s mother had said. She hadn’t been just any girl.” I guess this could be considered a tiny reference to a song I really like, [Just Another Girl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4z6QZz3GqOc) by The Killers
Before she’d even had breakfast, Zinnia called home. She sat on her couch for a couple of minutes, rummaging her brains to try and remember the number. It’d been so long since she’d had to, she wasn’t even surprised she’d forgotten it.

She didn’t call, they didn’t call her. That was how it always had been, and that hadn’t changed since she’d gone back north. She could feel her mother’s seething energy in the distance, though. But today she had to just ignore all the drama in her family in favor of more important matters.

Her father was supposed to be at home now after his surgery. And Zinnia, as a daughter, was supposed to be there holding his hand and distracting him from the post-op pain. So since she’d decided not to be, the least she could do was give him a call.

The man she’d hired to help them all figure things out answered the phone, and she asked very briefly about how things were, then he got her own father on the line, who reassured her it all was very fine. Wonderfully so, indeed. Zinnia breathed easy after that, even more when her father told her that her mother wasn’t home. It felt as if the conversation was… freer now, somehow, without her being there to mar it with her energy. Also, it meant her father felt well enough to not have her around.

When Zinnia hung up, she took one deep breath. Things were fine now. Her father would soon be up and about as he’d always been, gossip that he was; and everything would return to the way it was before.

On her way to work, she stopped by the tiny newsstand. There was a small stall outside with a few postcards and several other souvenirs. She’d always wondered why the hell they kept that up since Iver hadn’t had a real tourist in years, but today she couldn’t bring herself to scowl at it and actually stood there for quite a while, looking at everything.

She’d promised her father a postcard, after all.

Most of them were in black and white, old photographs of the valley and the small town. Nevertheless, the one that intrigued her the most didn’t adhere to that. It didn’t take the form of a picture but of a painting, and black and white was replaced by multiple shades of blue and white. The sky and the shadows in the mountains felt almost indistinguishable, they merged as if they were one. And all the snow on the slopes and the clouds up above made the painting seem as if both sky and mountain range belonged as one entity and not separately. The fine line between them resembled the still surface of the mirror, but you couldn’t really tell which of the two parts symbolized the reflection and which reality.

Zinnia smiled and got in to pay for it. Her father would surely appreciate the analogy, just like she had.

When she sat down at the counter in Candie’s bookstore, Candie still hadn’t shown up, so Zinnia entertained herself for a while trying to think of what to write on the back of the postcard.

Her pen shook a little, and she felt the words she’d write would always be too inappropriate for what she wanted to convey. Plus, there was also so little space in the back of a postcard to write something
good on the first try.

In the end, Zinnia settled for simplicity and a wish.

*This is home now,* she wrote. *Please tell your knee I can’t wait to show this to it. You’d love it, the food here is always 100% meat.*

She knew her father would never come so far north, because he had no need to. But… dreaming was free, and she was certain he would fall in love with Iver the same way he’d fallen in love with Zinnia’s hometown and its people.

“Oh dear, how late am I?” Candie’s voice said as she made her way into the store.

Zinnia chuckled when she saw her, sweating and actually worried about tardiness. Wasn’t it supposed to be the other way around?

“Not late at all.”

“You look like you’ve slept less than I have, kid.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Youth these days…” Candie said, sitting down on a stool too.

She somehow was capable of remaining silent for a total of half a minute until she noticed what Zinnia’s hands were toying with and said: “What’d you have there?”

Immediately, Zinnia turned the postcard over so the text wouldn’t be visible.

“Just… something I’ve got to send.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Zinnia nodded. There wasn’t a lot more she could say to that, even if Candie would lengthen a conversation from smaller pieces of information.

“Have you heard about last night?” Candie asked. If she couldn’t prolong a chat, she’d add more wood to the fire.

“No, why? What happened?” It’s not like Zinnia prided herself in her inattentiveness, but she would have liked to think that if something happened in town, she’d find out just like everybody else.

“Gunshots in the distance,” Candie replied. “Briggs men, I suppose. They’ve come out of their fort at last.”

“They do that, yes…” Zinnia muttered, clearly thinking of *who she was thinking.* They emerged out of their fort and disrupted everything solid Zinnia had a grasp on, and then left as if they’d never even been here. Whatever they did up on that grayscale wall, Zinnia didn’t want to know. The idea of a thousand men—or however many there actually were—living there, maintaining the peace in secret, as if peace required secrecy, kind of made her feel even less safe than if they weren’t.

Candie smacked her forearm gently.

“Don’t make light of it, huh? There haven’t been any armed skirmishes for years.” Zinnia realized for the first time in this moment that Candie, despite not being really old by her standards, still might’ve very likely lived through the last time Drachma had marched on Amestris soil. “You be
careful! Don’t leave after dark.”

Zinnia just shrugged, though.

“I highly doubt the Drachman will come here. Their fight isn’t with us, is it?”

“Still, you’ve heard me.” Candie stood up and went to set a book straight after she’d suddenly noticed it was askew on the shelf. “You’re not a soldier, and I know you sure like a good risk, so just stay put here and be careful until this is over.”

“Yes, mum,” Zinnia said sarcastically, unable to bite down a laugh after that. She was old enough to know precautions became a necessity sometimes, but it was always funny to hear an adultier adult giving her advice.

Her back turned to Zinnia, Candie began laughing as well. “Mum, she says…” she said.

But Candie might as well just have been.

When the scouts came to get her from atop the fort, describing the image of twenty of her men returning from the mountains, camouflage uniforms covered in blood that wasn’t their own, Olivier knew that whoever had fallen had taken some major damage.

Had Drachma made a move at last? So predictably? So unsuccessfully? They had grown weak and desperate in all those years, and that always made for an enemy that was easier to conquer.

_Fools_, she thought, shaking her head. The first openly aggressive encounter in decades and the Drachman had fallen like flies. She would’ve killed to see it.

This seemed to her like they were either truly letting themselves go or they were trying to distract Amestris with a failed feeling of victory. But it wasn’t like Drachma to just send a squad over here to die.

Fourteen men… One single soldier from Briggs would have managed that many kills. If she’d been present, she would have certainly taken them all out on her own.

Buccaneer informed her, so she wouldn’t have to meet all twenty soldiers at the time, that the bodies of the enemy had been left where they’d once stood, as a precaution. And, in a way, as a kindness. They wouldn’t return there for a while, until Drachma had come for their dead, if they did.

Olivier lifted one open palm to shut him up.

“We’re not just going to let them venture in without consequences, not even to retrieve corpses.”

The last time they’d tried to cross the border, weeks ago, it hadn’t ended well. And Drachma was practically begging to be _shown_ just how bad it could get. Pity Olivier wasn’t allowed quite yet to engage in combat. They would have receded so far back into their country no further defense at the border would have been necessary.

“But, sir, the bodies.”

“Yes. The bodies will be given back. _All_ of them. But they’re missing one, as it is.”

Buccaneer’s face was priceless.
“They don’t know the spy died?” he said.

“How can they?” Olivier said. Nobody had shown interest in finding their stray spy, had they? “But they will now.”

“We’d lose strategic power by showing we had her and didn’t succeed in taming her.”

_It’s not like Drachma would know that_, she thought. A dead spy, just like Esfir had said in her final moments, couldn’t spy for either side anymore. Her mouth was shut forever.

“We will be sending a message over to the bastards,” Olivier replied, “who think they can just win a war without fighting it like men.”

Buccaneer stood up straighter.

“What are your orders, then?”

She thought about it. Bringing the newbies would surely amount to an unforgettable experience they’d always hate her for, no matter how much they needed that lesson, but if they got under attack, she’d be in a position where they wouldn’t be much use, protection-wise, but quite the opposite.

Yet going alone was a suicide mission. How long would the Drachman wait to shoot upon seeing Amestris’ most feared general walk towards them?

“Fetch Miles and meet me at the gate,” she finally said.

By the time they were standing by the ditch, the sun was already declining on the sky, its light tantalizing and distracting. The flowers on the valley took the most entrancing of shapes and colors in the late evening, it all gave the impression that they’d stepped into a magical land.

But there was nothing magical about digging up a rotting corpse.

Olivier dug the shovel into the dirt and got on with it. She reveled in the physical labor that she’d never admit to herself she missed. Fighting, doing some high rank’s dirty work, pushing past the limits everyone else couldn’t.

She felt the eyes of both men on the back of her neck as the dirt piled up on one side of the ditch.

“Stand watch,” she told them. “Shoot anything that moves.”

Nothing would, but at least that gave them something to do until she tasked them to carry Esfir’s body to the battlefield where her comrades had fallen.

Olivier dug, hands bare against the metal of the shovel; Miles and Buccaneer would do the heavy-lifting after, she needed her hands free in case there was an attack. She’d protect them, if it ever came to that.

But the digging was hers to carry out and hers alone. Her kill, her responsibility. Her sweat and the sweet pain from exhaustion would pay for her mistakes.

Once she was done, night was almost upon them. It’d gotten much too late, later than she’d anticipated.

“Gentlemen, get it out of there,” she said, breathing as little as possible because of the stench, even if her lungs ached for air after the exertion.
Buccaneer, though, wasn’t as delicate about it.

“Jesus fucking Christ…” he exclaimed as he covered his nose and mouth.

Miles said nothing and helped him with it.

Then they marched towards the mountains.

On the way, she kept picturing meeting the enemy on the grounds she’d managed to keep them off of. She pictured the fighting again after so long, and she pictured her side winning. Always winning. It was definitely the right time, without sunlight and in no man’s land. If the Drachman were coming for their dead, now was the time to hit Amestris where it hurt. Olivier had given them the perfect chance.

She was almost disappointed when she and her second-in-command arrived and saw only the bodies, scattered over the mountainside like discarded pieces in a chest game. A few vultures had come down to peck at their exposed wounds, but they took off flying away as soon as she unsheathed her sword, prepared for a surprise attack.

No living Drachman soldier in sight, she signaled for her men to drop Esfir’s body near where the last sniper had fallen. Then she fished a piece of paper from her pocket and put it between the spy’s rotting teeth.

The message was as crude as the place where it’d been placed—KEEP THE PEACE OR PERISH AT LAST

“General?” Miles said. He didn’t understand these little games, but he still followed her blindly.

“If they come again,” Olivier replied, back turned to them. She’d walked up to the top of the hill, eyes on the horizon which had been ruptured by the peaks in the distance. She couldn’t see the pollution from the Drachman cities from here, but she knew they were there, hiding in plain sight, “it’ll be war.”

“Kind of you to let them know beforehand, boss,” Buccaneer said.

“Kind?” she said, and it became clear the level of judgment present in that single word. “If they come armed again,” she corrected herself, “it’ll be war. And it doesn’t look like they’ve any chances at winning.”

She stopped gazing at the mountains in the background, at the horizon and the sun that soon would be breach the Drachman portion of the Briggs range, and swiftly started walking down, followed by her men.

“I’ll send a batch back here tonight,” she announced.

“We’re letting them bury their dead, after all?”

She turned to face the taller man.

“That, Buccaneer, is a kindness.” And a kindness not many would do the enemy.

They walked back to the fort in silence.

As promised, Olivier sent a few men back at the site, in case the Drachman did come with weapons and clear intentions. This time she sent the snipers. She wouldn’t bring war down on the enemy until
the very last second, when they would realize their mistake only after it was too late to mend it.

She accompanied her men to the door as they went out there again, but she rode in the opposite direction.

Zinnia stepped out of the bakery with a tremendous desire to go home and just sit down for a full five minutes and not get up until her stomach literally begged for nourishment.

Long days succeeded one another and she no longer knew how long it’d been since she’d returned. She felt like she’d never left in the first place, but her bank account said different.

And her chest as well. She could breathe easy, now, knowing the surgery had gone well enough. She’d already sent the promised postcard too, and she hoped her mother wouldn’t be the first to see it in the mailbox. One never knew if she was still angry enough to tear it apart before her father received it.

Then, in the dimming light of the late evening, Zinnia’s legs quit their walking in the middle of the street on her way home.

Running into her right there now felt almost like an anachronism. She always came when the sun was up and shining, never before and never after, and now the melancholic last rays of light were more of a hue with the blue on her uniform than the warm sun Zinnia was used to seeing her under.

And on top of it all, Olivier was drinking.

A woman bathed in the sunset at one out of the two tables outside, legs apart, inviting, making Zinnia wonder for the span of a moment how it would feel like to walk between them and for once tower over her. And those arms… the sheer strength of them came with the name. She drank from a gigantic jar of beer (the size and weight of which Zinnia’s hands would’ve been unable to hold) with the least amount of poise in the world, and Zinnia’s eyes opened wide in awe. Her eyes saw in slow motion what the rest of her body was incapable of fully processing.

The greatest amount of small human actions coming from the general so far was right under Zinnia’s nose and yet she kept standing where she was, watching but not really daring to look for too many seconds at the same spot. The Ice Queen was miles away from her fort, drowning herself in booze and thought at a very unusual hour. There had to be a reason behind it.

Ice didn’t just melt.

Zinnia didn’t really understand if this… strange feeling in her chest and stomach that had frozen her mid-step meant that she wanted to start a conversation when she finally walked past the other woman.

What would she even say? ‘Good night?’ That would just earn her a disgruntled remark and little else, she shouldn’t bother.

She wasn’t going to bother, she didn’t even have to walk over that side of the now empty main street to go home.

She had absolutely no reason to. All those months of ‘almost’ and blushes and curses under her breath? Zinnia wouldn’t swap the roles now, she had better things to do than to cross the street.

Then why—why had her feet decided they wanted to cross it? What was in it for her feet? What was in it for her pounding heart? Her overexcited lungs, which seemed to have forgotten how to breathe
Her sandals clacked loudly against the cobblestone with every step. She was making her own customized announcement of her presence before she literally stood there, towering like she wanted to, but shaky like a leaf and dry-mouthed.

What do I say? What do I say? What do I say?, she asked herself over and over in the hope that the question would answer itself.

Her mouth, devoid of any good words to articulate, was open before Zinnia could tell herself to shut the hell up:

“Fancy seeing you here…” she said.

Olivier looked up slowly. She didn’t seem surprised or particularly bothered or even annoyed by it. She looked like she didn’t care much about whether or not the company was good, or whether there was any company at all.

“Stealing my lines now, are you?” she said, and she managed a smile, soft and small as it was. The kind of ‘small’ that people with broken hearts force out of themselves in times of emotional need. Then, suddenly as it’d begun, Olivier dropped it. Zinnia couldn’t help but notice how smoothly her face transitioned from one expression to another. Also, she had really long eyelashes of a very indeterminate color. Neither blonde nor dark nor brown. Gold-ish gray, if that was even a color.

“How is your father?”

“Better, thank you,” Zinnia said.

Walk, you fool. Keep on walking, don’t linger, she thought to herself. She was not walking and that felt like an admission of sorts.

“How’s…” she said, mind blank and mouth taking over like it knew what it was actually doing. “—the, uh, business?”

Olivier smiled again, more of a smirk this time, but equally small.

“Haven’t you heard?” she said. “It’s no longer safe for a youth like you to be out in the streets at night being so close to the border.”

Zinnia wanted to be offended by the word ‘youth’ because she really doubted the general was that much older, but safety took priority when she remembered what Candie had said about last night.

“They breached it?”

Olivier scoffed. “They tried.”

Zinnia stood there in silence for a couple of minutes, not really knowing if it would be more impolite to take off or if she’d feel like a disgrace by saying goodbye.

She had the bright idea to quickly glance at the amount of beer there was left for Olivier to drink, and her heart dove all the way down to the sole of her hurting feet when she discovered it was not an amount that would allow her to take off without Olivier standing up at the same time to leave.

Time’s running out, do something… Zinnia hissed at herself.

Then, after one quick chug at the liquid, Olivier stood up as foreseen and quite in slow motion as
well, and Zinnia forgot all about height and size because she felt like her own didn’t factor in. She’d felt tall her whole life, just… not very much so right now.

“You’re out here too. Aren’t you afraid?” she said in the end.

_Wonderful. You’re just making it worse. Shut up!!!_

Olivier held back a smirk.

“No,” she said. “But I’d be if I were you.”

Zinnia made a big show out of looking all around.

“I don’t see any Drachman here trying to kill me. What should I be afraid of?”

But oh that question… that question did not make any of it better, because they both knew the answer to it and neither would dare say it out loud.

“Depends on what scares you.”

“I’m not telling _you_ what scares me.”

They held each other’s gaze for what felt definitely much longer that a few moments.

“Will you walk with me, then,” Olivier asked suddenly, “since neither of us is afraid?”

Now, Zinnia’s feet and general leg area hurt from standing all day long, she longed for her bed or her couch more than she would admit, but Zinnia was also very much an idiot, and when someone threw a challenge like this one in such a lovely subtle manner, she couldn’t refuse.

She couldn’t refuse, no. And maybe it had little to do with the challenge that had really been more of an invitation. She could hear Candie’s voice telling her off in her mind, but she pushed it to the back of her consciousness and ignored all common sense. Drachma wouldn’t be out waiting for her to leave the town.

“Where to?” Zinnia said.

“The dark,” Olivier said with a grin. “Unless, of course, you really are afraid a Drachman soldier will come get us.”

“What will you do, if that happens?” Zinnia muttered because she didn’t need to speak any louder. People were already in their homes and the town was mostly silent enough that she didn’t have to talk very loudly to get understood.

“Let you run to safety,” Olivier said, looking into Zinnia’s dark eyes like she wasn’t afraid of it deep in her gut. “Cover you. Fight. Win.”

It was Zinnia’s turn to smirk.

“I don’t need anybody to cover me, General,” she said and began walking.

Olivier joined her a few steps later. For some reason, she believed that. Those eyes she’d been bold enough to stare into had more edge to them than any sword. They housed the kind of strength that wasn’t acquired as a skill but honed through defeat.

Silence and tension reigned supreme for a couple of minutes. Olivier wondered why the hell this was
a thing, walking. Walking with someone you thought you wouldn’t tolerate.

But Zinnia wasn’t writing now, or in the way, or defying anything. She was just a girl, dressed in a ridiculous knee-length gray dress that clung too much to her hips. A girl that led the way because she probably wouldn’t let herself become just a follower.

And Olivier couldn’t find a reason or excuse to hate her, much less to not tolerate her presence.

It didn’t take them long to reach the outskirts of the town, where the buildings gave way to miles and miles of flowers and grass. Under the very last, thin rays of sunlight, it felt like the black of the night and the surviving warmth of the sun were battling for dominance over the life that sprung out of the earth.

“Are you not writing now because of your father?” Olivier asked after a while. The stems of the plants around them brushed audibly against their legs.

Zinnia gave a little start at the question.

“I thought you didn’t want me to write,” she half-joked. Her skin still remembered the hardcore blush of that first day when Olivier had walked to her with all the strength of a raging fire and made her feel like she was ten instead of almost thirty.

“I never said so.”

“It was made implicit.”

“You could still write in your free time, for yourself rather than... for others. It’s good to have a hobby,” Olivier said, aware that she was a woman who didn’t have one. Because eating and walking around couldn’t be considered a hobby, and that’s all she did when she left Briggs.

“I don’t want one now,” Zinnia said softly, looking up at the stars, finally beginning to pop up under the blue surface of the day sky. “I used to.” She held herself, realizing that the night meant slightly colder temperatures. “I used to think I could squeeze some life out of everything. But now in my free time I just... want to rest.”

Olivier was going to add something when they both heard a noise in the distance—hooves against the dirt. Olivier unsheathed her sword, and Zinnia, against her expectations, stood where she was, legs slightly apart to hold position even if she had no weapon.

After a few seconds, they could discern that it was just a rider in Amestris’ military uniform, and Olivier put the sword aside at the time that Zinnia exhaled.

“Is that for you?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so,” Olivier mused.

The rider slowed down his horse at the last second. With one hand he kept the reigns tightly held, with the other he saluted his superior.

“Sir, you’re needed at the fort,” he said.

“Very well, then,” she muttered.

She turned to face Zinnia and offered her a hand to shake. So much in such a small gesture. Zinnia probably would never even finish figuring out exactly how much went into that handshake. Those
months of confusion and loathing… and now they were holding hands like new acquaintances.

If Zinnia had known the protocol, then maybe it all would have made sense—but no. This had nothing to do with protocol. This was a peace offering, and that much was clear even if Zinnia would never know what hid beneath its surface.

Maybe even Olivier herself didn’t know.

“Good night,” she told the flower girl, then she got on her soldier’s horse to go find her own to ride back on.

Zinnia watched them trot away until they were but a blur of dim lines in the darkness. She sighed when she lost sight of them—of her.

“Good night, General Armstrong,” she said, but no one was there to hear it.

On the horse, barely a few yards away, the soldier turned around a little to tell Olivier what was going on.

“The bodies are gone, sir.” He told her how they’d come, a handful of men with their faces concealed, and dragged away the bodies of their comrades without taking a second look at the soldiers from Briggs. “What should we make of this?”

Olivier remained quiet for some moments.

“That they don’t want war. Not for now, at least. This was their second chance to attack and they didn’t take it.”

“Then now we won’t attack either?”

She sighed and shook her head.

“Now we keep blocking their access to this country. And when war comes, they will know why we are feared even on our own soil. But not before.”

Chapter End Notes

this week I finished chapter 28 and... now, looking back at older chapters like this one, I think I'm falling even more in love with this story ^^. I'll keep posting on schedule, but I don't know if I'll be able to keep writing at my usual pace - college is time consuming XD
Summer slipped out of their fingers like sand. With every tick of the clock, the wind took precious grains of summer away from them. One day, all that time would pile up to form a beautiful beach, licked in equal measure by both tide and sky. But for now it was all stolen moments that would never see their potential fulfilled.

Zinnia no longer frowned when Olivier walked into the bakery. And Olivier no longer bothered to say something witty that she hoped would make it clear who was in charge. There was no need. None of them needed anything from each other, and none of them would find any pleasure in continuing behaving like their spring selves.

New season, new angle. And the angle was mutual silence, mutual tolerance, and the moment for very, very scant and subtle exchanges of words.

Greetings, the occasional comment that didn’t go unnoticed but didn’t get a reply back, farewells. Those were especially fun, because none would admit that they’d still be seeing each other the next day, so they tried their best at not adding that nuance to their goodbyes.

Zinnia was very good at it, because she knew this was just a silly old game the general played to pass the time. Why did Zinnia follow her lead, then? Not boredom—she had two jobs and a house to keep in a decent state. Not interest—because nothing was coming out of this two-way newfound acceptance. Not hope?

Eventually, if war broke out, Olivier would be seen here less and less. Eventually, if Zinnia’s ties to this place dissolved in the acidity of life, she’d take off and move somewhere that could hold her attention longer than Iver had.

Eventually, perhaps, Zinnia would find it in her to write. And if she also found the time to sell what she wrote, who was to say this new dynamic wouldn’t vanish in favor of the old resentment?

Nothing of the life they both enjoyed those days was etched in stone, it was written on sand.

And sand blew away, scattering the message. It got wet, and every grain forgot if it was the distinctive one. An O could very well turn into a D. Something that once stood there as an important pillar would no longer stand for anything.

Why worry? Why try to preserve it? Why think it through? Zinnia just went with it, and at night she did allow herself a minute to contemplate what her life had been, what it now supported itself on, and what it would one day inevitably become.

And Olivier, in her permanent aura of pissed-off mystery who does not want to be unveiled, didn’t seem to mind. Hellos, orders, small talk, goodbyes. Nowhere near as entertaining and enticing as an open battle, but it had to do. At least the hurricanes inside her were taking it easy now that they had no solid ground to devastate or be swallowed by.

Without anything to judge, without anything that drove her up the walls, she went quiet. She came down here to relax from the job that she didn’t want to distance herself from, nothing more. Whoever she met while she relaxed wasn’t important. Whoever she missed when she rode back to the border didn’t matter. What mattered was the job, the men, the fort, the country.
Amestris held, and Amestris would hold. Because Drachma had retreated for now. The border was empty, secure.

And that was why she could allow herself these breaks in the first place. When war fell down from the sky like a bomb, she’d have no choice but to turn her back on anything human and embrace the parts of her everybody else seemed to see as the whole reality within her.

Eventually, that was all there would be. The war she’d craved and missed, and the war she strived to win. War, war, war. Was it so selfish of her to postpone it for a few minutes every day? Didn’t Miles agree it was good for her health? Didn’t the men do the same, after all—come to Iver to eat and drink and drown whatever personal sorrows she wasn’t in on?

Eventually, war would drown them all.

Today, the only thing to drown in was the clouds, threatening rain in their dark gray color. And yet, Olivier saddled her horse and rode down anyway. As soon as the first drops fell, she’d turn back. But for now she could still enjoy the sun beams filtering through the gray.

Likewise, when war seeped into all their lives, she’d turn around and she’d never look back. But … now she felt strangely compelled to look forward.

At the valley, every green plant on it, every life, every stone, all the paths merging together in the distance, way down south.

At the town and its streets and the people who crowded the small establishments because there was not much else to do and the terrible food that wasn’t really that bad after a while … and the sky. Wherever she was, she’d look up at the sky, and no matter how many clouds carpeted it, it would still be there; that shade of blue that always brought her back to reality.

She got off the horse and she looked up now. Her blue had disappeared entirely from up there during the ride. Gray had taken over, cold and distant gray. Gray like the pictures from her youth, with her as the center of the frame because she was the firstborn, the heir. Her mother’s face had gone paler than white when she’d seen her daughter dressed in blue, ready to leave the capital forever.

Olivier’s horse refused to follow her on her way through the main street. It moved around nervously, breathing hard.

The rain hadn’t come yet.

“It’s just a storm,” she told the horse. Or herself. Storms were nothing to fear, but the feeling of loneliness they brought along weighed heavy.

The first thunder of the day roared a few miles away. Briggs must be already covered in rainwater by now. Then the rain began to fall, cool at touch. Olivier looked around to see if there was any place she could take refuge in, but she’d never be able to fit the animal through any of the shop’s doors.

It neighed loudly and tried moving away but she held the reins tight.

“Calm down!”

Her voice was swallowed by another thunder, the echoes of it nearer than the last time. If this idiot of a horse wasn’t making a scene, she’d ride back, but doing it like this was not safe.

“In here!”
Olivier looked behind her and saw the flower girl’s head out of the bakery’s window.

“Horse!” she said, to make herself heard over the storm.

“Canopy!” Zinnia said.

Olivier grunted but she dismounted, pulled at the reins and walked over there. When the door opened she was suddenly made aware of how soaked her uniform was, her hair. This wasn’t a state of dress she would like to parade.

She tied the horse to window’s bars, under the canopy, so it would remain dry, and then went in, dripping wet onto a floor that wasn’t her own.

Under the gray light of the day, nothing inside the place resembled the nature of it. They hadn’t even gotten the few chairs outdoors in to shield them from the downpour, and the lamps were all off.

The owner of the place stood behind the counter, looking apprehensively at the delicate food he’d prepared that nobody was going to eat now because the entire town was hiding inside their own houses.

“Sudden storm, huh?” he said as a greeting.

Olivier just nodded because that didn’t honestly require a full response and wasn’t meant to elicit one. Even if it had, her eyes strayed from the food stand towards the girl who still had half her body out the window, watching the rain fall like it was the first time she was being witness to it.

When Zinnia stepped off, body now full back inside, she smiled. And it looked like it was happening spontaneously, without any complicated thought process behind it. Like she was happy in this weather.

“Don’t get to see much rain, do you?” Olivier asked. She found it funnier than it had to be. The girl looked like a puppy rolling down a snowy hill. Olivier was certain she would’ve danced under the rain for as long as the storm lasted.

Zinnia immediately blushed a little at the question, too.

“Not in a while, no,” she said. The last time it had rained like this, with the elements giving it their best against all human wishes that it would stop, Zinnia had still been living in Central. Anthony and her had snuck under a roof to shelter themselves from the rain.

“Get used to it. There’s no real summer here.”

“That’s true,” Zinnia’s boss said. “Soon it’ll be cold again.” He sounded nostalgic.

Zinnia looked out the window again, frowning.

“Just a little rain and you’re all about the cold now?” she said. “Summer only just began! It was still chilly in the mornings a few weeks ago.”

Her boss and Olivier looked at each other and both began to laugh. At her, clearly. At her southern attitude, which neither snow nor rain nor a thousand years in these lands would ever truly conceal.

Zinnia wrinkled her nose in disagreement.

“In that case, I’m going to go. Charlie, do you need anything else around here?”
He looked at Olivier instead of replying right away.

“General, will you be having your usual today?”

The cakes and baked goods stared right at Olivier, asking her, begging her to say yes. But she just shook her head. She didn’t want to move much and sprinkle it all with rainwater.

With her negative, the baker turned to Zinnia once again:

“You really want to leave now? You’ll flood your own house once you get there.”

In that moment, the worst thing that could happen happened. Olivier’s stomach decided it would make itself noticed. She suddenly had to repress the urge to just take off without another word, but that wasn’t very… grown-up.

Zinnia eyed her for a second or two, thinking, then she said:

“I’ll stay. Let’s get this woman something to eat, shall we?” And she walked behind the counter. She moved around here differently than she did in the bookshop. Zinnia sure was comfortable around books, but here… she acted freely, giving the impression that she co-owned the place. Anybody who came here would immediately think that she’d molded bread and whipped cream for as long as she’d been alive. Olivier saw the remaining lines of soft muscle and remembered the stance she’d taken the other day instead of fleeing or requesting protection, and Olivier knew this girl was no baker and no bookseller.

Eventually, she sat down. Here, she was just a costumer, albeit a special one, because she was sure nobody else got as good a service as she did.

When she got her usual portion of sweet indulgence, she didn’t sit down this time. Zinnia looked at her from behind the counter.

“So,” she said. “What brings you here? Work? Or just… the food?”

She allowed herself a tiny smile. No one—absolutely no one—liked the food. You learned to tolerate it and then it maybe wasn’t so bad, but it had nothing on the delicacies of other regions. Perhaps the tiramisu took the cake, though. Whatever amount of coffee it had, the rest of it masked the taste. And it did seem to be Olivier’s one and only choice of dessert. Not that she ever ate anything before it.

“Does it matter?” she asked.

Zinnia shrugged.

“Not really, but…” She took a quick look at the ongoing storm. “Seems like we’re going to be trapped in here for quite a while, might as well make the best of it.” She smiled. “Charlie’s not the most effusive speaker.”

He smiled.

“I may bake like the gods, but … chitchat’s not my area.”

And at that, he went back to reading the newspaper, probably to distract himself from watching over his precious creations waiting for the perfect costumer.

Zinnia’s eyes span from the window to Olivier’s lips—and it became clear after a few times it was always the lips her gaze returned to, never the nose or eyes, and always curiously like she expected
Olivier to breathe fire sooner than later.

“Which one is it, then?” Zinnia asked again after a while. “Work or food?”

Olivier merely ate.

“Food,” she said.

Zinnia leaned on the counter with both arms, facing the general’s way.

“Still no clues on that thing you were investigating?”

It took Olivier a few tries until she understood Zinnia meant alkahestry. “No.”

Zinnia’s face and smile fell.

“Ah,” she said. “I was… I guess I hoped you would get to the bottom of it.”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. Your safety won’t be compromised by that particular lack of information.”

“I know,” Zinnia said, shrugging. “Still, mysteries aren’t as fun as they look.”

She knew why she’d said that.

Olivier smiled a tiny smile.

“I guess not, no.”

Almost an hour and a few ‘how can you eat that’ jokes later, when the rain began to fall a little less bone-crushingly, Zinnia had been leaning on the wall by the window for a while, trying her damn best at keeping her eyes on the street and not the inside of the bakery, where Charlie continued reading his newspaper with all the calmness in the world and Olivier munched on what might as well have been her third self-indulgence.

The general rose slowly from her seat, thanked them both even if it sounded entirely absent-minded, and decided the storm had subsided enough for her to ride home now, if her horse allowed it.

Zinnia’s eyes were open wide for the whole of it. A ‘thank you’? No tension whatsoever besides from her own? This wasn’t the first time it happened, but she found herself more and more shocked at it the more often she noticed that lack in their few interactions.

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait it out?” Zinnia even said, out of the stupidest desperation in the world, the kind that allowed her no quarter and no intervention to keep it at bay. “I’m going to stay in till it stops raining.”

Despite the obvious invitation, Zinnia saw in Olivier’s face that the ‘no’ was the only answer she could give. After all, she was a busy woman, and probably had a thousand things to tend to in her impregnable fort. People to kill, orders to bark, things to organize. Military things, whatever the hell that entailed.

Olivier stood tall and proud like a tree as she untied her horse to the window bars and threw her hair back. Zinnia kept telling herself to look away after a few seconds of uninterrupted staring. At least her mouth wasn’t open.

“Maybe another time,” “Olivier said, her tone final.
Another time… That is, if she let a storm catch her off guard again.

“Well, then…” Zinnia replied. She suddenly didn’t know what to say. A ‘no’ was a ‘no’, even if it was so elegantly disguised. She had no clue whatsoever why a woman like Olivier was disguising her negatives, but that, after all, was none of Zinnia’s business.

She watched as the general mounted her horse, gave a curt nod to her as a farewell, and rode off into the last and thin drops of rain. She looked like the rider of those bronze statues in Central, heroes of some acclaimed battle that present-day commoners had forgotten about. She had the spirit of all those commanders before her who had led armies to victory and returned to the praise of the people, glued to their horse like they made for one entity instead of two.

If Zinnia had had a camera at reach, she would’ve taken a picture of that moment when the light of a far-off lightning had hit Olivier’s hair.

Zinnia would’ve sent it to her father, as if it were another postcard.

*This, dad, is the woman who watches over us all. Sometimes I really doubt she can be human and of this time. Doesn’t she look to you like she might’ve been famous in the military centuries ago? Doesn’t she look to you like someone far too powerful to live in the times we’re living now? Doesn’t it seem unfitting to have someone like that sent off to the harshest place in the country, doing a job no one wants or cares about?*

Zinnia shook her head after concocting that weird mental image to try and vanish it away, but it persisted.

Maybe, just maybe, she had to go back to writing again. If only to get this all out of her head, where it could *not* belong. And she could actually keep it to herself this time. Hell only knew the kind of stuff that could come out of that…

Summer moved forward inexorably, and Zinnia still would not hold on to anything she wrote. And she wasted paper and ink beyond her own expectations. But nothing stuck. Every word she got out kept ascending until it disappeared, none of them wanted to stay.

Quitting, though, was never an option. She just… wasn’t pursuing this all the way. What for? The things her mind created, the strings of words it put together… Those weren’t the type of thing she could ever share with another human being.

She could never let anyone read any of it, so she might as well not finish it, not pressure herself to. Nobody was ever going to have access to it, so she was allowed to make it as bad and unfinished as she wanted to.

She was allowed to look into the reality she’d described and call it over-pompous and exaggerated. Untrue. She was allowed to spill and spill over the paper and never actually take a second look at what she’d written before she put it away.

Besides, with the ongoing current of soldiers coming and going into town, who had time to write anyways? Briggs might’ve been on the lookout for Drachma, but the men sure as hell liked to make the most out of their free time by drinking beer and eating like there was no tomorrow.

And Zinnia had two jobs. No time to do anything but gossip silently and distract herself from the less pompous and not as exaggerated version of reality that walked into the bakery once a day without
fault.

War might have been brewing but… not anytime soon, apparently.

What kind of a commanding officer would leave headquarters this often, and to do nothing, in times of war?

Olivier sat in the sun and did not take a single layer of clothing off. Zinnia tried not to feel sorry for her but, in spite of what everybody had told her, summer here was hot and didn’t sport the kind of weather that you could survive in long sleeves.

Sometimes, in her morning breaks while with Candie, Zinnia would sit in the sun with her, but neither of them said much. They just wanted some peace and quiet. Then, later, they’d move their chairs to the shade because it had already gotten too warm to bear any longer.

It felt the same it should’ve felt to share a space with literally everybody else, with an exception. Neither of them were ‘anybody else’. They were close, so they didn’t talk much. Zinnia would’ve asked about business again but she wouldn’t really know how to follow a conversation about strategy and lands and enemies and budgets. And she supposed Olivier had also run out of polite but disinterested questions about books and her personal life. Once she’d told her that her father was alright, that was it. Olivier couldn’t go on asking if he was fine, because she knew he was.

The realization that the one conversation they’d had and stretched as far as possible was over hit them both in the chest like lightning, then a terrible feeling dissolved in their veins. When a conversational topic is over, if you want to continue talking, you need to find a new one that won’t die for a while. What those two could’ve talked about would have lasted five minutes tops. Perhaps it was better to just be in silence and listen to their own hearts beat, urging them both to find something to say and find it soon.

The feeling got worse, too, when they became extra aware that one day they’d tire of looking for things to say and just opt for going back to their normal lives, to the lives that didn’t involve sitting somewhere doing nothing except quietly and intermittently looking at the person sitting next to you.

And how terrifying that thought could grow to be in the right light.

Olivier found free time from beneath the piles of work she should be doing, and she made up for the time lost late at night under Miles’ judgmental eyes. But she’d be damned if she let this indulgence go before it was really over.

Her goddamn sanity rested on this hour she spent outdoors, breathing in clean air and listening to the sounds of small town life. A life she didn’t want but perhaps envied to some extent. They were happy, in their innocence, and they didn’t look up at the sky in search for something better, greater. They liked their existence as it was, and probably didn’t know how much more they could have access to if they looked around. Their ignorance was bliss.

And this girl, with her dresses and bare knees and her messy hair and messier eyes… She sat there every day, she worked among them every day, and she had the same look in her eye Olivier did: Envy. What if. But never ‘I want that’.

Summer began to wither away, and the horizon threatened with storms and clouds and days when the uniform didn’t bother her at all in the sudden lack of heat.

The sun felt overwhelming at times, then other days its warmth was insufficient, the breeze blew chill enough to counter it. And the nights slowly adopted a longer length. The few electrical lights in town
were on sooner than a month before; Olivier saw it on the patrols she still participated in.

Soon, the valley would go dormant for the winter, and only Briggs would stand throughout the winter. What was she supposed to do until spring, other than hold the border? What would she entertain herself with now when she was overworked?

She felt chills down her spine in the mornings, when it was a little bit colder than it’d been last week, and only the sun at Iver’s main street calmed her down. For a while.

Eventually, there would be no sun.

Today, when she was back, Zinnia was already pretty busy trying to get her ice cream not to fall on her lap and ruin her dress. She made the most adorable of faces trying to get all of it with her tongue, like a cat licking at its food with all the enthusiasm in the world.

Olivier didn’t smile at it now. She had the ice of her name impaling her chest as a reminder that summer was coming to its end, and that it meant losing this last free glimpse into what a normal life was like.

“Something on my face?” Zinnia said all of a sudden. Olivier was brought back to reality and found herself staring at her.

“You’re going to drop that and vandalize the street,” she said, very serious. “And someone will have to do something about that.”

“I thought lately you were less intent on throwing me out of here.” Zinnia, sheepish.

Silence.

“You won’t want to stay when the cold comes.”

“Who knows?” Zinnia said. “Maybe I’ll stick around longer than you think.” She raised an eyebrow.

But Olivier shook her head and let it be. No one stayed the winter. And when the migrations started, the flower girl would go south with them, she was sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

We’re getting closer and closer to the heart of this fic with this gratuitous mention of these migrations... ^^ I’m so excited to share what happens next, honestly

Also, fun fact: what inspired this chapter was an image I had in my mind of Olivier riding under the peculiar, chiaroscuro light of a storm.
Witnessing the break of dawn from the top of the wall counted as a privilege, even after a couple of hours of uninterrupted watch and the quenching need for sleep it brought along. The mountains shone under a different light, their colors sublimated under the supreme rule of the first rays of white sunlight, always thinner and more translucent but never for too long.

The sky gave birth to a new day, parting its cloudy legs to give way to the definite engulfing yellow light that bathed the top of Fort Briggs first, then travelled down to the paths between the mountains and spread as far as Amestris’ southern border.

Miles appreciated the simplicity of it, the routine. Every morning, without fail, this would happen. And every morning, without fail, Miles wished he would be allowed to see it. But he couldn’t always sign himself up for the last night shift just for the sunrise.

If only it had been that. The sunrise entailed a new start, something that most people in this world didn’t get often. This sunrise reminded him of how lucky he had been to run into Olivier Armstrong’s indisputable iron fist. Up here, many years ago, she’d challenged him.

The oppressor had sheltered the oppressed. It had been a truthfully long time since Miles had thought of her simply as Amestrian. Or as an oppressor. She was an outlaw, like the rest of them, although she’d made sure to clarify publicly that, even if she’d made an effort to deconstruct the toxicity of who she’d been before, she would always belong to the first category.

Miles’s only home had been the military. A body without a head, a pile of individual cells that needed a unified voice to move. And he’d become a soldier at the worst possible moment for someone of his skin- and eye- and hair-color.

Ishvalan, people would mutter behind his back.

Olivier had frowned, helped him fake his name and declare the old soldier dead, and had given him a home and never a choice. She’d excused her actions on account of the fact that she needed him.

But he had seen through it. Olivier Armstrong might have been a practical woman above all, yet she didn’t allow for her soldiers to suffer.

He remembered this, more than any other time, when he watched the northern sun descend the Drachman mountains.

Today Buccaneer stood by his side, as refreshed as he’d began the shift many hours ago. To him, it could’ve well been September 1914 or September 1885. Time didn’t bother with him, it was a battle Buccaneer seemed to always win. Miles didn’t think it should be possible for a man his age to so stoically survive all the things Briggs had thrown his way, but, of course, Buccaneer survived it all. If in the end this overexertion at the fort devolved into war, Miles didn’t dare doubt that Buccaneer would be the last man standing when it was all over.

“I’m fucking starving,” he complained now, like a child who’s hungry.

“You’re always ‘fucking’ something…” Miles muttered, eyes still on the horizon behind which the enemy hid, as expertly as Briggs had always stood proudly on the border.
Buccaneer guffawed.

“I wish.”

“Don’t start, huh? I’m tired. I don’t want to listen to your stories now. I’ve been here for most of them, anyway.”

“Then what? Do we just stare at the mountains? Nobody’s going to invade right now.”

“Well, for once, I wish that they did.” Miles sighed. He didn’t, not really. Drachma would declare war on them, sooner or later. And as ready as Briggs was to withstand a siege or whatever they decided to unleash, nobody really craved the brute spectacle of war. “We’d get it over with, at least.”

And they could go back to the way things had been before. Hard work, but never too much of it. Bad food, but never too little of it. Awful working hours but never too many in a row. And calm. Miles would miss the calm.

Buccaneer, on the other hand, took none of this seriously, as always. What use was worrying when you’d already won all the battles you’d entered? Odds were he would also come alive out of this one, which was exactly why he could afford to make jokes.

“And probably also die,” he joked loudly. “Before my … retirement.”

If he was almost seven feet high and with an automail arm, Miles, too, would be that confident about his own survival.

Miles started laughing too, because the rumored retirement of Captain Buccaneer had become fresh gossip, and Briggs could always make the best out of it. There were already several stories circulating the fort, most of which had been concocted by Buccaneer himself.

“Somewhere warm, she says,” Buccaneer went on. And he went on because, Miles knew, he wanted to cheer him up a little. Watches were boring on one’s own, and sometimes that lack of activity became loneliness. “Haven’t you ever given it a thought? A quiet happy life, somewhere warm…” He’d imitated Olivier’s voice. “How about she does? Might make something out of it. The only thing I’d do is sweat!”

And copiously. Buccaneer’s favorite activity other than being loud and telling ridiculous stories of his youth that everyone knew already was showing off his body like he’d won it at a fair. Unfortunately, that included access to information of the bodily fluid kind.

“Tell her that.” Miles nodded. “Maybe she’ll keep you here if only to not have to picture the image.”

“Yeah, maybe…” This time Buccaneer’s tone had returned to normal. Miles figured he was thinking about the inevitable, about saying goodbye to the only thing he knew in life. “Where would you go, if you could?”

“I don’t know,” Miles replied, honestly.

He’d never really given it much thought. He’d already accepted the fact that, unless something major happened, his life was Briggs’ to take or save.

“Well, the world’s a wide motherfucker.” Buccaneer shrugged. “You could go anywhere.”

“In my retirement? I’d probably be too tired to. I’d just want to rest.”
“Yeah, but where?” Buccaneer insisted. “That’s the whole fucking point, Miles. Pick a goddamn nice spot to grow old in.”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “I like it here. I’ve nowhere else to go.”

“You’re no fun,” Buccaneer grumbled. “Well, I’d buy a cottage literally two miles away from here. Build it with my own two hands if I had to. And she’d have to watch me live there and shoot any Drachman that crosses over for her. She’d have to thank me.”

The worst part of it was that he sounded terribly serious, and Miles didn’t doubt for one second that Buccaneer would stroll around the mountains whenever he could, piling up sticks to build a house from where to figuratively flip Olivier off.

An unkind thing to do, considering the only thing their superior wanted to achieve with her policy was collective survival. They lived by the motto of ‘survival of the fittest’, but sometimes it became too palpable that this magic phrase didn’t always apply. They didn’t survive out of strength or plain aptitude. Briggs men survived on their wit to assess a situation before going in. And, at the end of the day, because of the orders of their general.

Strength prevailed, but strength hadn’t always lived on. Many men had died so today’s men could stand where they stood.

Miles’s eyes turned stern. “You know why she wants you out.”

“She’s a fool, that woman. One’d be hard-pressed to get a retirement form approved literally everywhere else in this country… but no. She needs us outta here in case we die, ain’t that right? Well, too late… too late, Miles. We all know what can happen. None of us here is a kid. In any case, she is.” Buccaneer breathed out—loudly. “She’s dreaming if she thinks I’ll quit Briggs that easy.”

“We’ll miss you around here,” Miles said, measuring his words. He didn’t want to verbally agree with Buccaneer on this, because in the end when the time came Buccaneer would just have to do what he was told. And if Olivier ordered him to leave the province, he would have to. Miles didn’t question that fact, which they both knew to be true, jokes aside. “It’ll be good to have you around for a visit from time to time.”

Buccaneer’s smirk was almost as intense to the eye as the sunrise.

“… Provided you wanna listen to my stories then, when I’m an old man.”

“Shut up and keep watch,” Miles grumbled.

He would miss those stories next year. The fort would become a quieter place for a while, until the next big and boisterous storyteller rose among them.

He sighed. Buccaneer’s absence would be noted.

Then, watching the day bloom like a flower before his very eyes, Miles thought about his own retirement. That was still many years away, a dreamy notion he didn’t feel like entertaining. Would Olivier still remain in northern land by then? She was older than he was, perhaps she would have already retired. Or, and this seemed more likely to the major, she’d still be barking out orders, a little more stubborn than she was now.

She would send him away, and he’d… he’d go south. But where?

“Ishval,” Miles barely muttered.
“What?” Buccaneer said, turning to look at him instead of at the ground beneath them.

“If I could go anywhere, I’d... I’d go to Ishval,” Miles muttered, his eyes still on the border. “See what’s left of it, anyway.”

“You know what’s left.” Buccaneer sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know how you do it, knowing what this institution has done and still sticking around.” He put his huge hand on Miles’s left shoulder. “But I’m glad you do it. This wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Miles smiled and reached out a bare hand for him to shake. Buccaneer did, and the grin on his face was infectious. How many winters had it been, already, since they’d met each other?

“And what’s the plan if the general refuses to let you live near Briggs?” Miles asked after a while.

“Is she going to stop me?” Buccaneer replied, as a clear challenge.

Miles couldn’t help chuckling. That would be a worthy fight to witness. The bear against the mountain.

“She might.”

“Let her try.” Buccaneer smirked. “I don’t care how retired I am, this place will always be home, and all of you family.”

To be fair, Miles thought, finally allowed to taste his sunrise with a touch of silence, Buccaneer had spent over half of his long life in that fort.

Olivier, unlike her men atop the wall, didn’t have patrol duties until much later, so for now she was sitting in her office, glued to her telephone, trying to find answers to questions she’d already established as useless. And the rest of the world, of course, did consider them to be unanswerable as well, which didn’t help the vein in her forehead to stop throbbing.

“Yes. Access to the records these past ten years, yes.” Olivier breathed through her nose in an attempt to remain calm. “What do you mean, you’re not authorized? Do you know who you’re talking to? I’m looking to increase the number of officials. I don’t know, ask whoever is in charge. Yes, I’ll hold...”

She didn’t know what had led her to actually make this annoying phone call. But she was tiring of sitting around doing nothing. Even if she went out there and watched the border like everybody else, the border did not move. Nothing moved. Nothing changed. Gunpowder in the air was still just a wish of hers. The sooner it came, the sooner the war would be won. But no, Drachma was pacing it, like they always had. On top of being cowards, they’re idiots, she thought. Either that, or their master plan, if it existed, was far superior than any of hers.

She would exhaust every bullet point in the list before she gave up trying to find ways to outsmart their previous, failed ideas.

As for the sudden phone call, she really doubted there was anybody in Central’s records of Xingese descent. She really, really doubted it. As far as she remembered, there definitely were old Xingese bloodlines living in Amestris, but she’d be hard-pressed to trace them all to the current day. She would have better luck, if any, tracking down the military records. Although, so far, she couldn’t say she’d struck gold.
She knew there wouldn’t be any soldier alive. She just knew. When they confirmed it, she wouldn’t feel disappointed. She wasn’t allowed to. She’d just blindly move on. To the next thing. To the next shift and the next budget list. Because she had to.

She tried to remember if she knew anybody who could’ve been biracial. But all that came to mind were the features on Mustang’s face, and she scowled at those. Even if he happened to really come from a Xingese family, he was an alchemist above everything else. A war hero—an undeserved title, if you asked her. Maybe she would write to him—maybe—in case he had information she could find useful. Maybe. She was running out of other options, after all. But what were the odds of Mustang, hero of Ishval and most annoying officer of all, knowing enough about alkahestry to help Briggs weaponize it?

Then the person on the other line came back, and as expected, the only thing they could give her as a half-hearted apology.

“Go be terribly sorry somewhere where that’s useful,” she spat at them, and then she hung up.

Sealed records could be opened, but even when they were, like now, that didn’t mean shit. She still had no upper hand over the Drachman tech. The tanks were, frankly, improving more than she’d thought, but going nowhere near as far as they should. The promise of war danced in midair with the dust and no one could trust Drachma to make it true in the future instead of now. And… alkahestry? At this point the word evoked nothing but failure.

_The flow of life has grown stale_, Olivier thought to herself.

The knock on the door brought her back to the one reality that had kept her going this long: she couldn’t let this place become stagnant as well.

Some soldiers came in, all trying to hide behind one another. One of them was Austin, from Central. He’d been suspiciously quiet lately, without participating in any disaster, which Olivier knew to appreciate by now.

He stepped forward with a big smile on his face. She frowned. Where were the days of this kid being afraid of her scowl?

When he opened his mouth, he asked for permission for him and his mates to leave for an hour or so—newbies, of course. Only the newbies thought they had to ask permission.

She observed them for a few moments. The only one who didn’t cower by the door was this Austin boy, survivor of a few nights doing dishes and more than one terrifying glare. He had guts, after all, didn’t he? Perhaps this was his moment, the moment when he truly became one of her people.

“Just get out of my sight,” she mumbled at the room at large.

“Then we can go?” Austin said.

“I don’t know, _can_ you?” She rolled her eyes when he didn’t react because he hadn’t got the joke. “I’m not your mother, Austin. Is it your break?”

“Yes!” he said energetically.

“Then you may go.”

“Thank you, sir.”
She snorted.

“Thank someone else.”

When they left between whispers, she smiled to herself. He’d passed the test, he was no longer just a Central dog. No one ever was for too long.

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Days hardly scorched the land surrounding Iver anymore. The valley endured gentle sunlight, then the breeze which summer had carelessly set loose as time went by devoured the trees and the remaining flowers without daring yet to end any of them.

Zinnia wondered, during the brief spans of time she did spend outdoors, if the north had its own understanding of the seasons and their duration or if to its people summer and autumn were one and the same. Down south, where she’d been living in places she could no longer regard as ‘home’, summer made the town almost inhabitable during the two first thirds of the day, and autumn came with slightly less intense heat waves during which one could leave the house without the prospect of a certain sunburn.

Here, even at noon, she now needed to bring a jacket everywhere, and long gone were the days when she could bare her legs. The people around her still hadn’t gotten to that point, comfortable for the moment with lighter clothing and enjoying the last remnants of a sun they weren’t too used to having all around the year. This amounted to another difference between her and them, a reminder that no matter how long she lived there, how kindly everyone treated her, Zinnia still belonged in the limbo between cardinal points.

Surprisingly, the town soon became infested with Briggs soldiers. Now, it was no longer their commander who rode all the way down the valley for a drink or some food. Officers arrived, strolled, sat, and then left to return a few days later. There was so much blue around, Zinnia followed it with her eyes, avid to find a body wearing it proudly that was never the one actually walking past her.

These men had her broad shoulders and strong arms and filled their uniforms just like she did, but none walked that upright, no one bore the mark of discipline nor had the stance of someone who had been in charge long enough to fear the post she held and uphold her values to save everyone beneath her. These were just… soldiers. Men of family and tradition and loyalty. Zinnia did not want them.

Free from the strain in the mysterious fort where rumor said they prepared for the upcoming war, Briggs men came into the local bakery and filled their mouths with warm bread and sweet desserts Zinnia served with a watering mouth.

She stood behind the counter, a jacket over her shoulders, and heard them talk. That, at least, conveyed the feeling of summer better than the weather. Freedom, exaltation, enjoyment, life. A cycle of stories instead of seasons.

When she was off work herself, she sat where she’d used to—where she knew she would be easily found if somebody wanted to see her, casually run into her, not that Zinnia had any obvious interest in that happening. Observing the square and the street and listening to the samples of conversation slipping her way in whispers by the wind turned into an occupation of sorts, even if there were no words thrown in the mix this time, just glances and emotions and one feeling she could never find an accurate description for.
Zinnia sat in the sun, her neighbors queuing near the baker’s for some staples, the soldiers from Briggs gathered around a table in the small bar opposite where she was. If she pricked up her ears, she could even make out the words, dancing in midair like dust waiting to meet her skin.

She closed her eyes and felt the breeze around her, the individual sounds leaving the soldier’s mouths, grasping at straws till they found her to cling to.

“You know, one time... one time she had me staying all night to do the dishes and then when she saw me in the morning she sent me off to bed. She’s awesome,” one of the younger men was saying. At least from this distance he did look comparatively younger, his face shone a little more enthusiastically and he gave the impression that being afraid was not in his league.

Zinnia sat up straighter at the mention of that ‘she’. So much blue, so many uses of ‘she’ all alluding to the same person. Her heart fluttered in her chest, whispering carefully the words she hadn’t dared write down in a while.

Why do I always find her in words, even if they’re not mine? she thought.

“Your concept of awesome is... worrying, Austin.”

“I’m telling you,” he said. “I am telling you. You got nothing to fear.”

“Yes, you. And... everything else.” Austin’s friend sighed.

Zinnia imagined they were talking about life at the fort under the rule of the Ice Queen, about times of war. No Drachman had managed to cross the border yet, or at least Iver hadn’t heard otherwise. The wall stood.

Some new recruits from Central had been sent north in the past few days to help keep Briggs as tightly woven as it was. Maybe this conversation had spun that way, a veteran of the north reassuring a friend who used to work at Central that this wasn’t so bad. Zinnia almost smiled at the thought.

Not that bad, indeed...

“Come on, nothing bad’s going to happen,” Austin said. “If anything, we’ll have to stop an invasion.”

“Yeah, I bet it’s our boss who makes the liaison between ‘invasion’ and ‘nothing bad is going to happen’.”

Austin’s eyes opened so widely Zinnia thought his head would explode from the strain.

“Do. Not. Ever. Under any circumstances. Call. Her. Boss,” he said, looking around where they were in case the aforementioned was in their vicinity.

Zinnia couldn’t help but laugh out loud this time. Because Olivier Armstrong did look the type to say an invasion is no big deal until it’s completed and she wouldn’t let her men be overpowered in battle. Also, she was too dignified for the title of ‘boss’. Candie, in her small bookshop, would embrace that title, joke with Zinnia about it. Olivier would insist it dishonored the ancient tradition they upheld in the north.

The two men quickly turned their face towards Zinnia, who despite herself kept giggling. When she saw them, she bit her lip and tried to look inconspicuous, probably failing. After a few seconds, they desisted and she could breathe again.
Dramatically, Austin’s friend asked, continuing the conversation: “And why not?”

“There are… stories. Captain Buccaneer tells them sometimes. Of… the war. He is the only one who called her that and survived. That right is reserved to him now.”

“For the love of—Austin, what the fuck’s happened to you? I don’t see you for, what?, three months? And now you look like a man living a conspiracy theory.”

“I’m telling you. That woman…” Zinnia saw the spark of admiration in the young man’s eyes. He was far younger than her, he still harbored hope of a better life in his gaze instead of mindlessly chasing the shadow of one. “I wouldn’t be surprised if literal hundreds of books were written about her in the future.”

“I’m honestly scared right now. Honestly. You need sun, and… I don’t know, wine. And you need to come back to the real world, huh? I swear, I don’t even know anymore why I decided it was going to be a good idea to join the military… You’re all nuts. I’m the only sane one.”

Austin patted his friend’s shoulder. “Won’t last long. I was just the same. Soon you’ll see the light.” He had a ridiculous grin on his face, like that of a man who has seen into the future and holds knowledge of what is to come, aware that it is far better than the other person fears.

“What light??? The windows on that wall are small as hell!”

“God, I forgot how you Central people are.”

“AUSTIN?????? Have you forgotten already you’re from Central as well???”

But Austin just smiled a sly smile.

“I’m kidding,” he said. “I’m just kidding.”

Zinnia, on the other hand, shook her head and smirked. Maybe this Austin boy had once had the look of a Central dog, his leash going all the way back to his rightful owner, the Führer, but not anymore. His eyes had been opened by the cold wind of the northern grounds and the iron grip of his fearless general on her sword to defend him and every other men in Briggs if need be.

He had tasted the freedom of a northern cage, and now he knew, like many others before him, how to turn the key and escape the prison to fully merge with the land and its people, now no longer as an exile from the capitol but as a man from Briggs.

Funny how that turned out. The dullest of men came from Central and left the fort weeks later to come to Iver looking like different people. Zinnia sighed.

Is that what happened to their Ice Queen? Did she freeze over in the winter when she first came? she thought. Has anyone succeeded in thawing her since? Where does she belong now, in her own mind? Is she a woman of the north, or does she still miss home?

Despite their fair complexion, the Armstrong family had never settled down anywhere near the north, as far as Zinnia knew. Their Amestrian roots kept them safe and sound somewhere crowded and shielded and wealthy, not a tiny town in a province as large as the others but twice as vacant. Zinnia wondered if their home was still Olivier’s home or if, like herself, she’d long since stopped trying to call it so.

A while after the men from Briggs left, she was still sitting there. She didn’t move until the sun began to decline in the purple sky. Its blue-ish hues helped her face the reality of waiting. Because she had
been doing that for hours, alone in a square full of people, holding on to the smallest of clues in case they led to what she so thirstily awaited.

Zinnia knew now in her heart, as much as it hurt, that Olivier was not coming today. That was how she knew to give up.

“You came,” Dew said, a giant smile on her face. Winter had looked good on her, dressed in coats and gray dresses and black tights. Zinnia put two tentative arms around her, circling Dew’s petite body and pressing her chest against hers. She didn’t want the heartbeat beneath it, just to know it was there was enough. “You came, I’m so glad you came…”

Dew giggled, Zinnia cried. Dew didn’t know, would never know, how hard it had been to get out of bed that morning, to drag herself across the town and knock on the door of a house that Zinnia now knew another person might open for her instead of her friend.

“I’ve found someone!” Dew had said days ago. “I want you to meet them.”

And Zinnia had dressed pretty, just in case. If the world was cruel and cold and unforgiving, then perhaps for once it might turn things around and bring a wave of absolute disaster over to Dew’s life only to reward her with the reassurance of an old friend turned lover.

Zinnia had come. She rested her chin on Dew’s shoulder and held her closer, just a little closer, not hard enough to make her scared or suspicious or uncomfortable. Zinnia hid her face in that hug while Dew finally poured the last of her secrets—all of them lovely and perfectly scented, like she was—over Zinnia’s bare neck.

“Of course I came,” she said in a smaller voice than she’d meant. “I can’t believe you’ve finally done it. You’re finally there…”

Months and years of searching and now Dew was one of those people who fit in somewhere, whose fingers laced perfectly with someone else’s. Her fingers would now be held by a different hand, her ears gifted with words coming from a different mouth, her lips kissed by someone who’d had better tact in courtship.

Zinnia broke the hug first and forced a smile out of her. For her, for Dew. For the life they’d both wanted that Dew had never known Zinnia wanted with her, and for the life Dew would finally have now.

Zinnia held her hands in hers.

“I’m so happy you’re happy.”

Of course I came, she’d thought to herself as Dew let her in to meet her new beloved. This might kill me but I’ll gladly die in exchange for the happiness you wanted.

It’d never killed Zinnia, after all. And sometimes she wondered, was Dew unhappy because of that? Did that kind of promise still stand after it became clear one part of the deal would always remain impossible to be true to?

Of course I came, Zinnia had thought. I love you.
Chapter End Notes

I can't believe I'm just one chapter away from posting the second arc of this crazy fic ghfdjkfvgfud, but there's no turning back now, so here we go XD
The winter pact

Chapter Notes

And thus commences the last chapter of this first arc... What awaits in the next arc, you'll ask? (Well, 14 more chapters, so far, and... things XD many things). Winter, it seems, is truly coming.

Candie hugged her with goodbye at the tip of her hands. She wasn’t imposing her usual womanly wisdom on her, or being the mother she felt Zinnia had never had. It was just... a hug that lasted a little too long, barely even crossing the line of acceptable. Not tight, not uncomfortable, but sorrowful. A hug that could be witnessed on every train stop in the country.

But fall hadn’t fallen upon the north yet, and Candie’s bookshop was thriving, and Candie should’ve had no reason to hug her goodbye like this.

Yet Zinnia said nothing. She smiled like she did every Friday, and hugged her boss and walked to the bakery. Candie waved goodbye at her from the door.

She worked silently today. Charlie barely seemed bothered by the lack of their usual banter. If he was curious as to why she remained moody and kept on looking out of the window, he didn’t pry. Sometimes people just picked up on this sort of stuff and knew it was wise to let her have some space.

There was no dark blue in the streets today, no matter how many times she looked out of the door just to check. An annoying gust of wind had possessed the grounds surrounding the town and now the streets were open channels for it to push through.

When she left, the sky was already getting dark around the edges. So much for long warm summers with sunlight till late. She hadn’t had a taste of the north before, having settled in in the midst of a hot bout of spring, and this was her first contact with the circumstances that wouldn’t just follow but in crescendo take over the warmer seasons.

The wind pushed her in the opposite direction she wanted to go, but for tonight she didn’t mind. She felt she’d been awake far longer than she really had.

Two jobs, one life, many worries, many regrets. And lately, the hovering memory of a girl with golden hair that had found something better. Everybody seemed to always find that ‘something’ that eclipsed everything else. Just not her. And she’d crossed an entire country looking to find it at last.

The past rubbed against her chest, coiling around her body like a hungry snake that’s ready to wait to annihilate its food completely. Hunting at its best, yet she resisted being a meek prey.

A memory can’t hurt me, Zinnia told herself, wrapping herself up in her jacket. Then why did it have the power to, after so long? What significance could Dew have in her life now? Who was she but a shadow of an ancient want?

Perhaps it was the memory of the ‘what if’ and its reincarnation in the present that had dug itself into
Zinnia’s heart, a thorn of a different kind that she wasn’t ready to admit was there yet.

Wanting felt like wasting away when the object of your desires was unattainable in every sense of the word. Even if Zinnia did something to become involved in the lives of who she’d once been devoted to, that didn’t guarantee she’d be granted access.

Her silence had been turned against her. And even if it was a double-edged sword, Zinnia didn’t feel ready for retaliation.

She went home for the weekend, the silence following her around the house like her own shadow did, quiet and pleasant but still lurking. Zinnia didn’t leave until Monday, and by the time she felt a little more confident in shaking this silence off, the choice to speak again and rejoin society had been abruptly taken from her.

Sleep-addled, she dragged herself out of bed, ate without appetite, and dressed warmly to face the cooler streets of Iver to go to work. She found them emptier than usual. Not a soul walked on them, no one was exiting their establishments or their homes. No one queued at the butchery. No door was open.

“ Weird…” she muttered under her breath.

It was the first day of autumn.

She stood before Candie’s bookstore for a couple of minutes. This was weird, her boss not being in already. The door was locked, the windows were shut, and when Zinnia peeked in, nobody was inside. It was like the entire town had been frozen in place and left devoid of its inhabitants but for one.

Sweating a little in spite of the morning chill, she knocked at the door. But she received no answer.

She all but ran to the bakery and did the same. Nobody opened the door. She ran and ran to knock at the doors of her neighbors, her friends, her bosses. All she found was silence and all she was met with was isolation.

Zinnia fell on her knees where she stood, feeling like the protagonist of one of her childhood nightmares. She tried to scream but found no voice to do it with.

They’d all gone, they’d all disappeared out of nowhere leaving no trace behind, and yet here she was, once again set apart from Iver’s crowds by something she had no control over.

When she rose again, legs shaking a little, she walked back home. Her heart sank when she saw how little food she had left. She was furious with herself for not having bought more before.

She sat by the phone, and almost cried at the frustration of not knowing any phone number from people around here. But of course, before, she’d had no need for them, she could just go over to their houses.

She hung up the phone and got back into bed, squeezing her eyes shut. Maybe if she fell asleep, when she woke up she’d be back to the reality she’d grown to understand and love and this would just be a nightmare to be forgotten. Just a temporary prison she’d gotten free of.

Her food lasted until it didn’t. By then, Zinnia had already broken into the main shops and hurdled herself up at home under a few layers of old smelly blankets she’d grabbed out of the wardrobe.

The plan was to hold on there for an entire two seasons, or until someone came back. But deep down
she knew nobody would return till the, so far, nonexistent ice melted in spring. This had just been…
another northern tradition she’d missed and had found out about too late. Of course such a small
town would have a backup plan to survive for so many months in the cold. When she thought about
it, the second the elements decided it was time to unleash hell upon the north, there was no way on
earth towns like this one wouldn’t get buried under the snow.

For now, under the thick covers and in her warmest clothes, Zinnia could get by. She toured the
surroundings of Iver, looking to find Southy’s cattle in the distance, but the old man was gone, and
so were his cows. When the last of the food ran out, she’d starve. Or she’d have to hunt. She had her
knives, but those were meant to be… for recreational throwing, not for life sustenance.

After a few days, she panicked, alone at home, eating dry food and hiding from the first gusts of
freezing wind coming down from the mountains.

She called Anthony.

“You have to help me, I don’t know what to do,” she said, before he even said a meek hi after weeks
of zero communication.

He must’ve understood this was no trifle matter, because he didn’t press any normal beginning of a
conversation.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. I’m just… the entire town left me behind. There’s no one anywhere, even the animals are
gone. And it’s cold. It’s getting colder by the week and…” She sniffed her tears in before they were
shed. “I don’t know what to do…” she repeated in a small voice.

“What do I do? How can I help?” he said at first. Then he began spitting ideas out like the more he
had the better use she’d be able to make of them. “Do you think you could walk to the train station
and get on a train?”

She definitely had the money, now that she had no post office to send it to her family from.

“That’s miles away from here.”

“Zinnia,” he said, serious, “you’re too far away. You understand I can’t—we can’t get to you, right?
You need to do this alone.”

Real fucking helpful, she thought. But he was trying to help. She told that to herself again and again,
trying to suppress her anger. It would be misdirected at him if she did aim it.

“No, I know, I just—what the fuck am I supposed to do in this situation?”

Silence.

“How close are you to Briggs?”

“I don’t know,” she whimpered, panicking again. It wasn’t like she hadn’t contemplated the option,
if briefly. How many defeats would that single act be equal to? Would her face fall from
embarrassment when the doors of Briggs opened to let her in, if they ever did? “When the soldiers
come they take horses with them, so it has to be a while.”

“Farther than North City?”
The numbers cross-faded in Zinnia’s head. She wanted to just urge her brain to find the answers but all she remembered from her trips to and back from North City was that they were always too long. And that was not helpful.

“I don’t know.”

“Then…” Anthony said, thinking. “Then get a good coat and some food and find shelter. And call from time to time if the line holds so we know you’re still alive, okay?”

His voice had been so sweet at that that she couldn’t help but giggle a little. She even overlooked the ‘we’. When had it been ‘we’ in Anthony’s speech?

“You’re stubborn, so don’t give up. I’ll… I’ll try and get hold of North City’s command center or something, get a rescue team for you, okay?”

Silence fell again. She could hear her own agitated breath disrupting it.

He was going to help her. It was going to be fine. North Command would send help, and she’d be out of there, she’d go where the rest of Iver had gone.

“Anthony?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry. It’s stupid to say this now—or at all—but I am. I wish things had worked out better.”

Zinnia had said that so quickly, it took her friend a while to understand what words had been uttered separately.

“They worked out fine. I’m glad… I’m glad you can call me about this kind of stuff, after all this time.”

“Me too,” she whispered. But really, she was begging for her life, not apologizing. She hated herself for it. She hated that she was doing this out of fear. Hadn’t she had years to feel remorse for having stopped loving him? Hadn’t she thought time and time again and he had nothing to forgive her for because it hadn’t been anyone’s fault? “I can do this.”

“You can. Don’t freeze your butt off,” he said, then he hung up. Because he wasn’t in this room with her, because his ‘we’ was a fluke, as always. *He just wants my emotions to feed on them, to feel better when he gives me back the bones.*

Zinnia sat alone in her deserted living room and wept silent tears, thinking, *I shouldn’t have called him.*

Zinnia found thick gloves and thicker coats, she found stockings and jumpers, and she put them all on and walked out to the bright light of the day, knife in her hand.

Her heart still ached at the thought of this, still shouted at her to get back inside and just hope to get rescued. But days had gone by and no one had come for her—no one would come—and her meat rations were soon to run out. She’d been left with no choice but to do this.

After a few hours in the village’s surroundings, when she returned she did so with a few rabbits and tree bark to stockpile. She wouldn’t freeze in the cold that the blue mornings in the mountains
already threatened her with, she wouldn’t starve either.

The day she meant to call Anthony again, the line was dead. But it didn’t matter. No one had come, no one was coming. Zinnia alone would pull this off for the life of her. Sometimes she heard the town creak in its silence, the pipes slowly thaw from the night’s mild frost, and she lay in bed, eyes wide open, unable to sleep. Some days she still felt like the final girl of a terribly slow and meaningless nightmare. But weren’t all nightmares meant to terrorize you into waking up?

When the true cold of the north finally came, without a warning and without a thought for the world it was going to devastate, Zinia felt it. Her eyelashes weighted twice as much as usual, and the simple fact of sitting up on her fortress of a bed took more effort, more energy.

She looked out of the window and for the first time in months she saw the colors of winter tainting Iver. The sky had been painted a terrifying shade of dark gray, specs of slightly lighter clouds clogging up like fog in the streets, and little snowflakes fell with the wind in messy spirals. From the relative heat of her room, of her house, Zinnia could watch nature unfurl before her and not fear it.

Sooner than later, though, she would have to gather her courage and face it to feed herself. Sooner than later, the timid feeling of safety she’d built here in the past few days would be swallowed by the advance of a winter that still wasn’t so.

The fort buoyed in warmth. Olivier’s nose wrinkled when she felt it. She would have killed for a little bit of the temperature outdoors to seep in there, and contented herself with having it for a little while today when she and her men left to do the last sweep of summer. A summer that, thankfully, was done as last.

The real deal would still take a few months to come, but she gave silent thanks that the worst of the heat was over. After so long, she’d rather gotten used to the unforgiving cold, and she welcomed it.

“General,” said Buccaneer when he got both his sturdy black horse and her own out of the stables. Today, she’d had to pay momentary attention to the last tank prototype, a much better and advanced version than the last she’d agreed to supervise, and he’d made her the favor of fetching a ride while she tended to other matters.

“Miles?” she asked. The major was supposed to be coming with them.

Buccaneer rubbed at the back of his neck.

“Just about getting done saddling up,” he said.

“What could possibly take so long?” she mumbled, and got on her horse, having Buccaneer follow a few seconds after, as if he’d been waiting for orders.

A couple of minutes later, Miles came riding towards them.

“ Took you long enough,” Olivier grumbled. “Ready now, gentlemen?”
They both nodded and followed her as the gate was hoisted open.

The feel of the blizzard’s winds in her face meant confirmation that winter would soon be upon them all, and knowing this was sweeter to her than anything in the world.

Finally, she would battle Drachma in her own terms. Ice and fire and a quiet battlefield where her enemies’ screams for mercy would be louder than her cannons.

The world was definitely now devoid of human sound as they marched towards the town she thought evacuated by now. By this time of year, in this weather, Iver would certainly be locked under seven keys.

She sighed imperceptibly to her second in command.

She knew what this year’s migrations meant, other than the obvious, and in the busyness of the last times, she’d succeeded in forbidding herself from thinking about it.

Iver evacuated all its life forms to North City, where surviving six months of moderate to intense cold was plausible and more comfortable than in a half a square-mile town in the middle of nowhere. It was logical and it was tradition, and it was better this way. It gave her the perfect excuse to do her job and focus.

Olivier rolled her eyes when she heard the beautiful autumn silence being pierced by Buccaneer’s laughter a few steps behind her.

There they go being excitable little punks again… she thought. Buccaneer was probably telling stories, in his loud voice, and Miles was being extra polite and laughing as gently as he could not to make his laughter audible miles away from their position.

“Ah, there it is,” Miles said after a while when he spotted the town. “Been a while since I came here.”

“He! You work too much,” Buccaneer said. “They still serve a terrific beef stew—”

“Leave the chitchat for later,” Olivier ordered all of a sudden. “We’ve a job to do.”

She dug her heels onto her horse’s side, galloping away from the two men, who looked at each other in disbelief as she became smaller and smaller in the white distance.

“What’s up with her?” Buccaneer asked.

Miles shrugged.

“Come on,” he only said, and they followed her trail.

Olivier knew their job here couldn’t be simpler. Tour around to see that everything had been properly sealed, that nobody had been accidentally left behind (which had never happened in all the years she’d been up north), and consider the town out of bounds until spring, when the first to return would brave up the tender season through its newly born rays of sunlight.

She knew it didn’t take three people to carry this task out, least of all the presence of a general. But she’d wanted to be here. To make sure things were working out as they should this time of the year. Bringing Miles and Buccaneer along in the end just amounted to a way of covering her tracks, and she would really appreciate it if they kept their mouths shut until they got back. The sooner they checked everything was in order, the sooner this mood of hers would disappear, like it should’ve
days, almost weeks, ago.

_You’re a fool, woman_, said the little annoying voice in the back of her head. _What do you hope to find here but snow and stone?_

Her horse’s hooves clacked gently against the cobblestone of the main street. The space didn’t look the same it used to without the yellow light of the sun and the scent of flowers. And the flowers themselves. Now it just oozed out coldness and loneliness like a wound oozes blood.

Olivier shivered atop her horse. So much for wanting some chilly weather.

She ventured into one of the minor streets, following no specific directions, and not really paying attention to the buildings around her. It all looked fine to her.

It all looked abandoned, just like it had to.

Then she saw a glass window shattered in one of the small shops.

“Now, this is unusual,” she muttered to herself.

She kept going, because she wanted to believe that sometimes the cold was capable of scratching cracks into glass, even in the earliest stages of autumn. She wanted to believe her chest wasn’t heaving with hope right this second. She didn’t harbor hope, she either knew she was going to win or she prepared for a bloodier battle than expected.

Then, reality overcame any hope she might’ve and might’ve not had.

There was light behind a door, there was light in the window next to it.

A yellow-painted house, its color striking against the monochromatic feel of the day.

Olivier dismounted, her mouth dry.

This was not going according to plan.

She heard Miles and Buccaneer approaching from nearby streets. She waited until their horses had stopped by her side.

“There’s someone in there,” Miles spoke, unable to believe it. But she’d needed him to say it, because that meant she wasn’t the one making it up with her devious mind, that meant it was real and whoever was inside needed their help, or their reprimand.

Perhaps both. Olivier was certainly in the best of moods for both.

“Stay put,” she told both men as she walked to the door.

She kicked it open and immediately heard a scream that she followed into the belly of the house. She’d never seen this many blankets in her life. Animal skin hung from the coatrack, dozens of food wrappings were on the hallway.

Her entire body froze on the spot when she saw… _her._

“What the _fuck_ are you doing here?” she asked out loud to the girl in the most ridiculous of coats that was staring at her in utmost fear in the living room of the house.

“General?” the girl muttered. Her lips were a little blue, and she was shivering slightly, even so aptly
dressed to withstand the cold.

*If she came from the city, no wonder she’s not used to it...* Olivier thought. But... was this a swell of pity going through her? Why was she supposed to care? Who was dumb enough to be left behind in a migration?

“Flower girl...” she muttered to herself, eyes wide open. Was she *dreaming* this? Had she really made this reality manifest itself through sheer will?

“Are you... are you real?” Zinnia asked, blinking, rubbing her eyes, perhaps trying to see if that would whisk the taller woman out of there the same way she’d come. Yet nothing of the sort happened.

The opposite did. Footsteps creaking against the floor, Olivier slowly made her way to the spot where the girl was kneeling, wrapped in coats and blankets, and she stared for a longer time than she’d meant to.

In this light, the defiant personality that had confronted her over and over during the past spring and summer seemed to have melted and given way to an adoration that presented itself raw through fear.

That girl was afraid, alone and afraid, and Olivier knew. And if she was in her right mind, she’d just call the authorities at North City and have them take her there, because she technically was their jurisdiction now that Iver was no man’s land. But Olivier kept standing there like the idiot that she felt she was.

She heard Buccaneer’s tentative question from the door:

“Boss? What do we do?”

And it snapped her alert at once. No more doubts, no more weakness. She was the Northern Wall of Briggs, winter bowed to her, not the other way around.

She bent over a little, and her hand didn’t shake when she offered it to the flower girl—now a withering, ice-covered summer flower—and her voice embodied a firmness she had honed for years.

“Come to the fort with me,” Olivier said without answering the girl’s question. *I’m here, I’m real, and—* The last part of that interrupted thought, she spoke out loud: “I’m not going to let you freeze.”

Chapter End Notes

(sorry for the lack of dialogue in this chapter, this was mostly about moving the action forward a little XD trust me, I've been writing towards 'come to the fort with me' since early May - and this was written in late July, so that's almost three months of feels I couldn't babble about and the feels continue even now, I must say)
In the nude

Chapter Notes

And Arc II commences!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Is she an angel?* Zinnia thought when she walked outside, where three horses and two men were waiting for her right by the house. Olivier helped her up on one of the animals, and wrapped her hands around her once they were both settled to make sure she didn’t fall once they started moving.

She was Zinnia’s savior angel.

It had gotten too cold to hunt, too cold to do anything but wait it all out, and Olivier had come to save her, to get her out of there. Anthony hadn’t done shit, despite his promises; a woman in a brown horse had, her blue eyes only icy in appearance. A woman who was kind and good and beautiful, standing there with the resilience of an entire planet against the puny wind. Zinnia didn’t lean against the body behind her, because she feared she’d have to jump away from nerves if she did. Instead, she focused on the horse and keeping her balance on it, not the hands holding her there. The two men by their side made no comment, content with sharing brief looks from time to time during the way back to the fort.

They rode in the blizzard. It seemed to be closing in on them, all visibility impaired by the acid grayness around them and the little occasional spurts of white that Zinnia wasn’t sure were snowflakes. It was too soon for snow. Or perhaps Zinnia was just too tired to keep her eyes open and watch the cloudy curtains of nature supersede one another. Eventually, all which she was only half-aware of gave way to a man-made structure that belonged to legend as much as it did on human grounds.

Fort Briggs. Tons and tons of metal melted together into the wall that had kept Drachma from invading for years on end.

*This is her,* Zinnia thought feebly. *This is her, this is her, this is her…* The wall she’d been nicknamed after. But the notorious Wall of Briggs didn’t seem very preoccupied with keeping Drachma at bay at the moment, or with anything that didn’t entail keeping Zinnia from sliding off onto the damp soil surrounding the mountains.

Tiny orange lights shone through the gray fog, unmoving. Zinnia made an effort and tried to stay alert. She still felt like a woman walking barefoot in a dream, no matter if Olivier had reassured already that this was the furthest thing from one.

Still, Zinnia was firm on the belief that she must have fallen asleep while she prepared for the next hunt, there was no other plausible explanation. This would never be happening in real life, neither women on this brown horse would allow it. Her fingertips tingled. She was holding just the wind in them. The horse’s reins were tucked into Olivier’s hands, also somewhat pressed against Zinnia’s stomach. That, of course, did not help with the tingling slowly moving up her arms and chest and down to her stomach, where it stayed as dream static.

She wished for rain, so that the cold drops falling from the sky would finally wake her up. So that
this beautiful fabrication of hers would just end, as all things had to. Sometimes one’s own fantasies were harder to maintain than just facing the heart-breaking reality of life. It hurt less to survive the cold than entertain something that would never make sense outside of the walls of a dream.

The main entrance gate was already wide open for them when they finally arrived to the very feet of the wall. Once inside, Zinnia looked up at the ceiling and her mouth fell. She had just been engulfed by a titanic beast of iron, steel, and copper.

She licked her lips, bit the lower one till she peeled a bit of skin off and it bled against her tongue. This just has to be a dream, I can’t be here. But the pain of the exposed lip gave her away. So did the brown and dark yellow colors of the fort wrapping around her in a comforting embrace. Even the scents spiraling in the air murmured a welcome worded just for her. I can’t be here, she kept repeating, fighting it.

“It’s… warm,” she mumbled to herself.

She felt Olivier tense her muscles behind her in a bout of slightly strained laughter.

“That, it is.”

Zinnia was in the literal belly of the beast. And she wouldn’t have to endure the cold anymore. If this was indeed a dream, it had been concocted to bittersweet perfection. Even the feeling of absurd immensity she felt in the center of her being was molding to how her imagination had dared picture it. Her eyes filled with unwanted tears.

But she couldn’t cry them right now. Olivier dismounted first, then offered her a strong hand in order to help her do the same, and Zinnia did without question.

“General, I’ll go get everything ready to take inventory,” Miles said.

Buccaneer had already given his horse to someone else and was boisterously making his way in, removing layer upon layer of clothing with every step that he took. He smacked the back of one of his old pals, Smith, in what looked like a friendly gesture, his voice the loudest thing in a place where engine roars were a common occurrence.

Miles blinked at Olivier. She was irresponsive, standing by the girl as if moving one step further from her would mean she’d crumble in front of them all. He wouldn’t have been surprised if the general had placed a hand on the girl’s waist to keep her upright, and he should’ve been.

“Sir?” he insisted. Yet he didn’t press it anymore. He didn’t ask the real questions he wanted to, because it made no sense to now. And he had no reason to pry so directly in matters that did in no way concern him:

A woman lost in the town Olivier had so often come back from sporting a different air and hiding pages upon pages of poetic prose.

Is this woman the writer of those letters? Miles wanted to ask. Is that why she’s not on a train south right now?

“Yes. Inventory.” Olivier answered firmly. Her eyes, though, never met his. “Do that. Wait for me. I’ll…” Olivier’s gaze fixated on the woman next to her, who hadn’t moved from the spot where she’d landed and seemed to be analyzing every detail of the ceiling; leaking pipes and lines that couldn’t possibly interest her so much.

“Get her to Doc, just in case,” he added. The girl definitely presented some dreaminess, and naturally
Miles wondered about her state, but she had been shivering during the ride, and her mental fogginess seemed to be attributed more to the shock of being here after an unexpected rescue than having had her body temperature drop alarmingly.

Zinnia had to lean on Olivier’s horse for a second, as if she meant to mark Miles’s words.

“What?” Olivier said to Miles, not having caught what he’d said. She still wasn’t looking his way. She wasn’t looking *any* way. He had no idea how to even begin to explain how strange that was, to watch the embodiment of resilience and pride drift away in his presence to places where no one could follow.

He shook his head, more to himself than to her, and took his horse by the reins.

“I’d get her checked up, just in case,” he repeated. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He had the strange feeling that finding a stray lady in town wasn’t the only thing that was off today, but it wasn’t any of his business, so he just walked away. Another mystery, he thought. Briggs would feed off of it soon enough.

“Are you alright?” Olivier asked Zinnia when Miles and his blurry words were gone for good. The girl stood next to her, and for the first time in months, Olivier realized just how tiny she was. Her frame occupied so little space in comparison with herself, even clothed as thickly as she was.

Her eyes, though, shone with more presence than her body would have made Olivier believe. Gently, they came down from the ceilings to look at her, as if she hadn’t listened to the question.

“I don’t want to have you fainting all over the place,” Olivier said.

Zinnia frowned.

“I’m okay. I can walk,” she said. Then she wrinkled her nose. “Where—where would we hypothetically be walking to, exactly?”

“The fort’s doctor.”

“You guys have a doctor?”

Olivier almost face-palmed.

“Yes, we do. Come on.”

She turned her back on Zinnia to lead the way down to the medical room. As she walked, she channeled her training more than she ever had before, even when she’d had to travel all the way to Drachma’s heart to negotiate for a cease fire.

This called for less strict measures, but she still needed to look regal and composed and not act like the shaky mess she felt her entire being had devolved into. A wall of ice melting, that would give the men something to talk about.

Her pace quickened at the thought.

*Maybe I’m dreaming and I never woke up this morning*, she thought. This couldn’t be happening to her. A woman lost in the fall’s first innocuous blizzard, shivering to hell and back, and Olivier Armstrong had lost her way.

Not literally, of course. Her sense of direction was intact, just like her other senses weren’t. How
could someone’s footsteps echo so loud in the corridors, how could someone’s fucking scent be invading the entirety of the fort without having even properly entered it yet?

Who would Olivier have to sell her soul to so this would stop? She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Her heart pounded rather than just acclimated to her pace, and every beat hurt a little.

*What am I doing?* That same heart yelled at her in desperation.

How could she have let this happen? Why hadn’t she sent for someone else today to go check the town was empty? Someone else would’ve done the bare minimum and it would have been a done deal before nightfall. Perhaps Briggs would’ve had to supply transport, but their involvement would have ended there. And now she’d be sitting somewhere with Miles taking inventory and sipping a cup of something warm.

But no—now, the girl was under their care. For as long as Olivier decided. And she hesitated as to what to decide.

*What the fuck am I going to do?,* she asked her heart in return.

When she opened her eyes again, she realized she’d been stomping rather quickly. For a second or two, she stopped on her way, her face half-turned to the girl.

“Keep up,” Olivier ordered, and kept moving—but only after she’d given Zinnia enough time to catch up. In a labyrinthine environment such as this, it really wouldn’t help Briggs’ reputation to have their rescued snowflake getting lost right under their noses.

It took an eon and a half of elongated seconds to get to the right aisle, the medical area of the fort, the heart of their health. Olivier didn’t fear for the girl’s health, especially not after these past few minutes during which she’d followed silently and without having to stop for rest. But she did fear for her own at this point. It had never been this bad, it had never been… irrepressible.

Whatever was happening within her, it couldn’t be anything good. She felt attuned to stimuli her five senses shouldn’t be able to perceive. Worse even, she felt as if they were whispering to let go, to let them all entice her in spirals until she forgot her own name and her occupation.

As if General Armstrong would ever allow that to happen. As if she was anything more than just her name and the reputation her job had bestowed upon her.

And thus, as she pushed the heavy door open, Olivier was about to explode. Because, deep in her heart, she knew she’d never been just a title.

“General,” the doctor said one he’d spotted her, raising both eyebrows. “Everything alright?” It wasn’t that usual to have Olivier come down here, when the wounded among their numbers were few and she soldiered through anything that might keep another person bed-bound.

“Found a lost sheep in the blizzard,” Olivier said simply.

*Sheep?* Zinnia thought to herself, but she said nothing. She felt too out of place, too tired, too hungry. And she trusted none of these people with that information.

“Let’s take a look, then,” the doctor said, moving from behind the tiny desk in the room, and standing, hands on hips.

Olivier waited until Zinnia understood she was supposed to sit down on the gurney next to the doctor’s desk, and then leaned slowly against said desk like it was her own upstairs.
“How do you feel?” the doctor asked. “Cold?”

“Not anymore,” Zinnia said, shaking her head. Little strands of brown hair fell from behind her ears. “This place is like an oven.”

The doctor laughed, feeling for the outside of Zinnia’s clothes and check if they were wet or frozen over.

“Okay, this is good. No outer wetness is good. Is it cold or damp beneath the first layer or two?” the doctor said. When Zinnia shook her head again, he added: “You can take ’em off if you want to.” He laughed. “Don’t want you to boil to death.”

Olivier looked away at the speed of light when she saw the first sign of Zinnia’s coat being unbuttoned in her presence. She, the second most unashamed person in this fort aside from Buccaneer, sheering away from this?

She considered walking out of the room—to give the girl privacy, of course—but for some reason she couldn’t move from where she was until the doctor had helped Zinnia remove all outer wear and she’d been stripped to her dress and tights. Even as he continued to examine her for symptoms of mild hypothermia, Olivier refused to even take a full deep breath. At this rate, she’d die of self-inflicted asphyxiation and she’d be remembered as an idiot instead of as a force of nature Central feared reckoning with.

“Where’d you fish her out of, General?” the doctor asked, then, saving her from her own mind. It was strange to him, if not something else entirely, that Olivier wasn’t saying something related to the trip to the town or something about the health of this kid. Despite not being a chatterbox, exactly, she knew her words had weight, and she normally mastered using them in the presence of her people.

“Iver,” she replied from the desk, still not looking even if she could have. “Huddling up in some house.”

The doctor guffawed for a few seconds and then shrugged.

“Someone has to be the first.” He turned to Zinnia now. The look in his eyes made Zinnia realize how seen she was in this place, how they perceived her as shiny and new, and therefore easily picked out of the crowd. “I don’t know how long you spend there on your own but…” He understood, too, that the experience she’d lived through didn’t come without a cost, and she was grateful when he left the sentence inconclusive. Her mouth suddenly ran dry. “For now, a change of clothes and a few days by the heater will do you good, yeah? A shower and some nice food, too.”

“And then what?” Zinnia asked before she could think of what to say, explicitly not looking at Olivier either. “You dump me back?”

“Nobody’ll dump you anywhere,” the doctor reassured her in an actual doctor-like tone, without all of the previous hints of amusement. “Winters here are long and harsh. You might as well stay.”

Finally, Olivier rose from her slumber, but she didn’t add anything to what the doctor had said.

“After how long can she be expected to be back to normal?” she asked. That might just have been the most important question. Now that Zinnia was here, what came next? A furtive stay? Pushing her onto some truck and driving her away into the wilderness?

Probably, if Olivier had a solid mind right now, she would arrange for that.
“You could leave right now if you wanted to, you’re not in danger of dying of hypothermia or anything like that,” the doctor told Zinnia. “But… I’d still advice a few days’ rest, kid.”

“‘Kid,’ my ass…” Zinnia mumbled under her breath.

“It can’t have been easy for you out there, all alone,” he finished, not paying her comment any mind. She wasn’t even sure he’d heard. “Give it a night or two, then you can decide what you want to do.” He looked at Olivier without his usual amusing aura, almost scanning her for what was going to happen. Like she could see into the future…

Zinnia hopped off the gurney and thanked the doctor for his time, then she promptly went through the door, only to turn back around immediately. She’d just realized she had no clue where to go and no autonomy in this place. Her entire heart plummeted down to her feet in dismay.

I’m going to need someone to take me everywhere…

Olivier smirked to herself. Zinnia wouldn’t have been surprised to find out that the general could read minds. She walked to the shorter woman slowly, waving in dismissal at the doctor.

“Little lost?”

“Obviously,” Zinnia said.

Olivier walked past her to lead the way again. Their shoulders brushed when she did so, and she deeply regretted everything that had gone down today, back to the first coffee she’d had in the morning. She would blame it all on that coffee, if need be.

“I’ll get you a clean set of clothes first,” Olivier said as softly as she could muster, though. “Then you can shower or write or whatever the hell you do in your free time.”

She cleared her throat, trying to sound serious and composed and normal. But none of this applied as ‘just normal’ anymore. A guest. That’s what the flower girl was here, a guest. Someone without any authority or plans in the north, just a girl who couldn’t return to where she’d come from, just a girl Olivier couldn’t simply put back in the cold.

“And tomorrow we’ll have to find you a job. No one stays here for free.” Assuming Zinnia would choose to stay. Assuming Olivier would let her. In two days, she could just put the girl in a car and have Austin or whoever drive her somewhere else. She could do it. And it would be the right thing to do, she knew that much.

Without expecting a reply, Olivier walked faster than she should’ve after that, extra aware that she had a little duckling following her around the place. A place where the men hadn’t seen an outsider in their home for too long, where the rules were clear and this was unprecedented if she got to call it anything.

She had no idea if she should take the girl to the common bunks and just… assign her one of the empty beds. Fifty men slept in each room. Men who were loud and not used to visitors and men who snored and got up to pee a few times at night and woke up early or went to bed late. She couldn’t just leave the girl there. But she also couldn’t strip a colonel, say, of his assigned private dormitory just because of this.

So, as a very last resort and a product of very quick and messy thinking, Olivier took her to her own room.

Just for a few days, she thought. What does it matter?
She should’ve known better than to ask herself that. She should’ve anticipated to those ‘few days’ and arrived to the conclusion that either way these four walls would remain forever changed after tonight.

The room was undeniably small. Fit for one individual bed, a tiny desk, and an even tinier private toilet without a shower. She was made awfully aware of that the second she opened the door and let Zinnia go in. The years had left a mark on the walls, which were covered in thin cracks in the concrete, and the last time the floor hadn’t creaked Olivier hadn’t been born yet.

She was made aware that despite her having been living here for years, not a single clue had been left behind that would give the impression she had been sleeping there for so long, in a room that was barely big enough for her and her scant few things. And now, another human being from the outside world, without a single relation to her, was in it, judging the lack of personality and all the little defects in the architecture of the room. A witness of her way of life. And it terrified Olivier to extents she couldn’t ever admit to. She had gotten used to being seen, even partly understood, though the words of this very same woman, but it was another story to stand there and feel the silent scrutiny going through the girl’s mind.

“Whose room is this?” Zinnia asked. She hadn’t spotted a recognizable sign of inhabitance. The desk was bare, the bed perfectly made, the drawers closed. But she had a gut feeling, one that threatened to burst within if she didn’t voice it a little.

“Mine,” Olivier said, arms crossed tightly over her chest.

Zinnia stopped looking at the few pieces of furniture and span around a little to look at her. Her face, showing gratitude and concern, stirred something inside Olivier, who finally stepped inside and remembered why they’d bothered to come to this room in the first place.

“Why would you take me here?” Zinnia muttered.

“There’s nowhere else for you to go at the moment,” Olivier replied, not looking at her. And that much was true, at least. There was nowhere else half as decent where Zinnia could stay.

Olivier distracted herself as she opened the drawers, looking for something specific. After a minute or two, she pulled out one of the newest pieces of clothing she had that she hadn’t used much. Some nights she was so tired, so restless, she fell asleep in her uniform and never really changed into anything more comfortable until morning.

Zinnia wrinkled her entire face when she saw the gray—simple, that was true—dress the other woman was presenting her with. Knee-length, with short sleeves, like what women in prison were made to wear.

“Don’t you have anything a little more… normal?” she asked, but it wasn’t ‘normal’ that she meant, not exactly. Don’t you have anything that’s not yours?

“It’s either this or underwear,” Olivier said, immediately realizing that if she stuck to this new proposition and the girl chose the latter option, this wouldn’t benefit her at all.

Zinnia eyed her suspiciously.

“I’m sure the men don’t get skirts,” she pointed out.

“They do, if they want them.” Olivier made furious eye contact. “Do you want overlong pants that will fall off your waist?”
“No,” Zinnia said in a small voice.

“Then just take it.” Then, Olivier grabbed a spare towel from the drawers and exited her own room without waiting for Zinnia. “Come on, I’ll show you to the communal showers. And then to the kitchens. There’s not a lot more here that’ll be of interest to you.”

*And after the kitchens...* Olivier thought, terror-stricken, and not precisely because of typical fear. *I’ll lead you back here and... and...*

The rest of the walk to that floor’s communal showers took place in silence. Showers, dinner, then bed. And then maybe when Olivier woke up the next morning, none of this would be real, and she could go on spying over the border, sending men out to the world, and tracing lines on maps that weren’t finished.

“This is it,” she announced curtly when they arrived. The door was dented and someone hadn’t done a very good job cleaning all the dust on it. “Here,” she said, handing the towel to Zinnia, who took her sweet time until she grabbed it. “I’ll wait in the corridor.”

“Okay...” Zinnia whispered.

Ever since they’d moved floors again, Zinnia had the feeling that something very heavy had sat down on her chest and had her pinned down to the floor, cutting her blood and air supply. Nothing hurt, but it all throbbed with urgency, as if telling her to get ready for something ominous.

Abruptly, she slammed one hand on the wall before she fell forward. Olivier caught her, her hands fast and hard around her. She cursed in the privacy of her mind, unable to believe this day had been allowed to exist. She’d yanked at the girl so fast, she wouldn’t be surprised if she barfed against a wall right now.

Olivier saw her whole life flashing before her eyes at the thought of a major disaster happening, but she didn’t let go.

“Do you want to sit down?” she asked, thankful that she’d sounded the usual amount of done and not worried, like she’d feared she would.

Zinnia shook her head a little too energetically. She still felt a little light-headed, but otherwise alright. Maybe she just needed some time and food, and a good night’s sleep. It’d been a hard couple of days.

“It’s okay, I’m okay,” she said, trying to reassure her host, who was looking at her like she was afraid Zinnia would ruin everything just by being there. “Plus, I’m filthy.”

Olivier tried to still her mind at the little, carelessly chosen word. Oh, Buccaneer would laugh, if he’d
been able to catch a glimpse of his boss’s mind right now.

They walked in, because at this point, what did it matter? What did anything matter? She just wanted this over with so she could finally let out all the air she’d been holding on and off for the entire day, as if this was any more stressing than facing an entire warring nation.

Olivier motioned for the girl to sit down on the bench near one of the bathtubs, instead of taking her to the shower area.

Zinnia stared at her, wondering if she was serious about this. Plus, Olivier was not moving, or leaving. And she looked about ready to sit down, cross her arms and legs, and glare until Zinnia emerged fully clean—through the whole getting cleaned process.

“I don’t want a death under my command, are we clear? Least of all one by shower,” Olivier explained, not that it made more sense after she had. “So, get in the tub.”

And that’s how Zinnia’s suspicions were confirmed.

No, no, no, no. No!

Under what circumstances is this okay?

“Are you just going to stand there the whole time?” Zinnia asked, trying to get her voice not to quiver, even if it squealed a little in return. This couldn’t be happening. How quickly had the dream become a nightmare, one of those sticky ones you couldn’t shake off of you the next morning.

“Someone has to stay in case you lose consciousness.” Olivier said, her voice equally high. To say she was panicking would have been an understatement. She did not panic, she evaluated the situation and pushed back any difficult emotion so she would conquer her obstacles in record time. She didn’t just… sit there and sweat like one of the men who came from Central on their first week.

Both women stared at each other, wide-eyed and taking shallow breaths, almost competing to see who would give up and leave the room first.

Zinnia felt okay, okay enough to shower on her own and then propel herself back into a wall for as long as it took to get to where she’d be sleeping. True, her neck felt insufficient enough to hold her head up and her legs were occasionally jelly, especially when she thought about them.

She had to sit down on the bench, breaking the eye contact and therefore losing. This makes things so much easier, she thought past the humiliation. This piled on her like that trip back home had, when she’d had to face everybody from her past life and pretend she didn’t ache to leave them all behind again to hide somewhere quiet and watch life go by as she panicked on her own terms and never anyone else’s.

She just guessed this was a bit of a situation in which she had to panic on someone else’s.

“Close your eyes,” Zinnia mumbled. She squeezed her eyes shut too. She would not be crying today, not for all the wealth in the world. Not in front of the Ice Queen, who would probably reach for her tears and freeze them where they stood, make spears out of them.

“What?” Olivier almost yelled.

“Just close your fucking eyes.”

And Olivier did. For her own good.

Then, Zinnia started undoing the laces of her boots. Next she got rid of the thick tights she’d been
wearing. She had to stand up to fully remove them, so she tried to do it on her own and found her knees wouldn’t do their job and keep her upright. She quickly clasped at Olivier for support, and felt immensely grateful when no eyes opened for the spectacle. Olivier held her hand in hers with newly found firmness.

Zinnia’s stomach hurt, not just from hunger or tiredness or whatever was ailing her right now. She felt light-headed enough to collapse right here, where she couldn’t, in front of whom she couldn’t. It would ruin everything, it would land her back in that tiny medical room, and she’d have to withstand judgment and questions, and being naked around more people. People who would look, because they’d have to.

Hands. She felt hands. Olivier’s left holding her steady, and another one hovering behind her back, just in case. Why? Oh god why? Zinnia clenched her teeth and silently asked the universe so she wouldn’t have any need for that ‘just in case’.

Olivier would have agreed. She didn’t move, she barely breathed, and her mind was racing. Slowly, in spite of her eyes being closed, she could almost see the fabric slipping down from around the flower girl onto the floor, and Olivier pretended this was something she did everyday, something that was entirely fine.

Because it should be. She was helping someone in need, like she’d been taught in the academy. A soldier helps others first, worries about himself after. But there was nothing in those textbooks and terribly long and sexist lectures about… about sensing another person’s presence right there with you, after years of being surrounded by those who could never make you feel this way. Olivier couldn’t see, but she heard instead, and she felt. The tiny little sounds overwhelmed her. Fifteen years… fifteen years since she’d been around a person who was taking her clothes off and Olivier had wanted to be there for it.

So many years kept in the dark, and now that she was made to momentarily inhabit it, she felt bathed in light. Besides, she forced herself to remember, this had nothing to do with how it all had been fifteen years ago.

Now it was just about the help. Not about the naked person. It could never be. She had a job to do, a title to uphold, a reputation.

Cold as ice, tall as the wall, impregnable.

But deep beneath that, when the last piece of clothing was shed off of Zinnia, Olivier’s mind gently begged that version of her who remained poised and calm and neutral: Help me. Please, just help me.

And the Northern Wall of Briggs came to the aid of that young woman who had fled and had abandoned the last ashes of love she’d been allowed to have slip between her fingers.

“I’ve better things to be doing than be here, you know?” she spoke now. But it wasn’t cruel or cold, just… a way to diffuse the tension within her.

Yet not Zinnia’s.

And a soldier serves, not hinders, Olivier told herself. And she felt guilt flood her, because she was doing the latter, not the first.

“I know!” Zinnia said in exasperation.

Her chest was tight and she felt breathless enough that she could faint right here, eyes humid with
unshed tears. Her voice came out all shaky. She had one leg over the bathtub now, she just needed to
get the other one inside it and it was over.

“Get out and do them,” Zinnia continued. “I’m fine. I can find my way, after, I don’t need a personal
guide dog.”

Finally, after both feet had hit the surface of the tub, she let go of Olivier’s hand and cowered behind
those small walls of white tile, scared of the moment the other woman would open her eyes. If the
general stayed, Zinnia would die of shame and other feelings still to be understood. But if she left…
Zinnia would still need someone to guide her around the fort later, no matter what she’d said just
now. And neither option comforted her.

Olivier grumbled once more. Her eyes remained closed.

“You’ll get lost,” she finally said, turning her back to the girl so this didn’t get more awkward than it
had to be. “I’ll just wait outside. Don’t stand up, don’t fill the tub too much. And call if you feel—”
She interrupted herself as she opened her eyes, blinked a few times, and saw the pile of clothes
before her. “You know how it works.”

She couldn’t stay here one more minute or she’d faint herself. This weakness was paralyzing and
obscure, and the more she tried to go around it, the harder it coiled around her.

“Okay,” Zinnia said.

Olivier stomped out of the room as soon as that word was out. Her exhale lasted so long she was
almost scared. But she composed herself, standing right by the door in case someone came along for
a shower. She wouldn’t have that.

If the girl had almost lost it at the thought of, well, this, would she even be able to articulate a sound
if one of Briggs’ tough unbashful men walked through that door, half-naked already.

And a man did approach the door to the showers so suddenly Olivier’s heart almost leapt out of her
chest.

“Miles?” she barked at him.

He was almost unrecognizable without his uniform, his hair falling around his face, no goggles, and
a towel wrapped around his lower half. This touch of modesty was endearing, she was not ready for
any more nakedness today.

“General,” he said. “All the paperwork’s in order, sir. I figured it would take you some time to
return, so I thought I might—”

She crossed her arms and glared at him.

“Out of bounds,” she just said, her back against the door, as if she was guarding some precious
treasure. A dragon of her own kind.

“What the hell?” Miles said at first, confused. “Since when is an entire shower facility cleared like
this?”

But her hesitance during a split second was his answer. There was only one reason why Olivier
would stand on this side of this door, and that reason had ridden all the way from Iver with the two
of them and Buccaneer.
“Since now,” she finally said. “Move it. Move it or wait your turn.”

Miles studied her for a few seconds, wondering if what had just crossed his mind was even possible. Of course, he shouldn’t have doubted it. Anything was possible up here.

“She is getting under your skin…” he just said, simply. What else could he say? If this girl behind the closed door was who Miles thought she was… nothing made more sense, even if this in particular made little sense as well.

Olivier bathed him in a long and heavy glare. She’d find no way around this either, would she?

“What did you want me to do, Miles? Let her freeze to death?” Let her faint in a public facility and not worry if someone saw? Zinnia’s being there meant Olivier would be forced to take risks, much worse than just this one. And as awkward as it all was, she was taking them anyway.

Miles frowned. Perhaps things weren’t as black and white now as she’d always pretended they were, after all.

“Maybe not,” he replied. “But… protocol would’ve kicked in, if she’d been anybody else. It stands at attention that… you’re not indifferent.” He almost left it off as an inquiry of sorts.

“I think you should go question my decisions somewhere else.” She spoke her mind clearly enough. It admitted no rebuke.

He looked at her, trying to tell her things she wouldn’t admit hearing out loud, and then he turned around and left, without bothering with the mandatory salute. Many didn’t, if the conversation wasn’t about work.

She scoffed.

“Not indifferent, my ass.”

She wasn’t giving the flower girl any special treatment she wouldn’t to anybody that needed her fort’s help, was she? This was in no way over the top, just… a bed, shelter, a job. The bare minimum, nothing more.

With your lurking around to make sure everything’s fine, a voice nagged at her inside her head.

But didn’t Olivier in one way or another always lurk around in the shadows, gently guiding everybody out of where they were into better situations? Nobody needed to be updated on this, but it was true, and it definitely redeemed her from being extra caring in this case. From being weak. And the weak didn’t survive for long in the north, even less so in the cold.

A long while later, the silence of the corridor was interrupted:

“I’m done,” called a little voice from inside the door Olivier was zealously guarding. It took her a moment to realize it came from the girl indeed. Some part of her hadn’t grown used to this vulnerability she’d discovered when Zinnia had come into the fort.

She practically ran inside that very second, forgetting for a moment that there might be something in there she wasn’t allowed to see. Thankfully, Zinnia had already put on the gray dress Olivier had lent her, and was standing demurely outside the tub, sitting down.

Olivier frowned, imagining that she might’ve stepped out on her own and taken her damn sweet time so she didn’t have to ask for help.
“Are you fine enough for dinner?” she asked.

Zinnia shrugged. She’d grabbed her clothes from before and the towel and placed them on her lap.

“If that’s okay with you. You said you had matters to tend to. If you have somewhere else to be, then I—”

“It’s fine,” Olivier cut her off at once, feeling a blush coming to attack her.

In the end, she might as well eat with everybody else. Miles had already taken care of today’s paperwork for her, and someone had to show the girl where the kitchens were, after all. It wouldn’t hurt that she was the one to do it. She’d offered to, before.

On the way down, Olivier promptly grabbed Zinnia’s clothes out of her hands and dumped them with the rest of the laundry. They would be easily recognizable, no one else in the fort used dresses. Zinnia tried to protest, but she had a hunch it wouldn’t help her at all, so she just focused on regaining her breath and testing her own stamina.

Food would definitely be a welcome addition to the day.

The second she walked in first into the kitchens—Olivier holding the door open for her, a courtesy that wouldn’t be repeated—the smell flooded her and she almost unhinged her jaw and dived face-first into the portions being served a few feet away from her.

“Kitchen’s open twenty-four hours. We have three meals a day,” Olivier droned on. “And there’s always food in storage in case you miss one.”

“Oh,” Zinnia only said.

“Sit down,” Olivier ordered. Her heartbeat had finally calmed down, and she felt slightly shaky, but nothing she couldn’t repress into oblivion. This, at least, was routine.

She walked to the counter, nodded to the cook, and took a couple of plates with the smudgy rations for the night. Despite the hour, many a soldier were sharing a table and talking animatedly among themselves. The noise, while not unpleasant, still bothered her. She felt a pressing need for silence so she could think clearly and assess the situation as her usual self, not this… mess.

She’d left the flower girl standing by the door, and she hadn’t moved from there, even if told otherwise. As Olivier walked to her, the door opened and Miles came in, his grey hair wet, and dressed in comfortable attire.

Olivier held her breath until she watched him approach a table far from the entrance. She walked quickly towards Zinnia.

“Sit,” she said again, and this time Zinnia did, not daring to make eye contact or say anything so far. Olivier tried to imagine what it would be like to walk into this fort without having an idea of what happened inside. But she had no room in her heart for pity—not anymore.

Olivier set both trays down on the table and sat across Zinnia. Her brown eyes were watery, but otherwise she looked fine. She wasn’t pale, that was a good sign.

“If you’re going to cry,” she said, voice low, “do so when you’re alone. Not here.”

“I’m not going to cry,” Zinnia said. “I’m just… taking it all in.”
“Good,” Olivier replied, and focused on her food from then on. As did Zinnia; eating would truly lift her spirits and help her recover some strength.

A few more men came in not much later, and when they passed by their table they greeted her solemnly. Some always did, excepting the veterans from the times when Olivier had been a newbie herself who had long ago chosen only to do it in more professional meetings. Here, in the kitchens, in the showers, out in the field, she was another one of them.

One of the soldiers, Austin, smiled warmly when he saw the two women and actually approached them.

“Who’s this?” he asked, meaning Zinnia.

A new face recognizing new faces, that was interesting, Olivier thought, but she made no comment.

“Visitor,” she only said.

“Oh.” Austin looked at Zinnia, his eyes inviting and homely.

The naiveté in them scratched Olivier’s heart on the daily. He might be a Briggs soldier now, but he still retained some partial softness that she feared might end him one day. A little kindness was fine, but a bucketful could mean you’d stop in the middle of a mission to aid a fallen man and inevitably fall yourself as well. Every time, Olivier’s mind replayed on a loop the image of Captain Buccaneer emerging from the snow, his entire right side covered in his own blood, so red against the white around them. Never again, she’d promised.

Olivier shut her eyes for a few seconds. Never again.

“And from where are you visiting, if I may?” Austin asked. Warm, nice, interested. Even here, that set him apart from the rest, who ogled but didn’t pry and wouldn’t ask questions until Zinnia was established as a non-threat and an acquaintance from the general.

Zinnia smiled at him, glad for the question. This, to her, was normalcy. People interacting without judging or projecting their lives on you. Perhaps time ago she would’ve sent him away, because she didn’t like to be bothered, but his gentle question gave her a feeling of… familiarity in a place she felt like a pathogen in.

“The town a few miles down the road,” she said.

Austin frowned.

“Aren’t you guys supposed to have migrated south already?”

“That’s enough!” Olivier said. This would’ve blown her cover if she’d had one. But the fucking nosey kid wanted to dig deeper and deeper, didn’t he?, and that could only lead to exposing the weakness inside her that just kept growing. And the north needed her where she was— tall, strong, proud, icy. Ever the wall, never just the woman. Fifteen years… Couldn’t she just be the woman for five minutes? “That’s enough,” she repeated, lowering her voice as half the room had ceased their eating to see what was going on. “Find a table to sit in, Austin. And scram.”

“Sir…” he said, eyes down. But his face remained calm, no trace of ear in it. Good, she thought. Obedience shouldn’t be rooted just in fear. Not in a kitchen, anyway.

When he’d walked away, sitting down with a few fellow soldiers in the back of the room, Zinnia stopped messing with her mashed food and looked at the woman opposite her.
“He was just being nice…”

“Why you’re here is none of his business. None of their business.”

“Why am I here?” Zinnia dared to ask.

Olivier swallowed her words down so she wouldn’t have to exit her own kitchen in fury.

“If you prefer the blizzard, then—”

“No,” Zinnia said immediately. “No, I just… He was just being nice. Is that not allowed here? Are all of you supposed to be heartless? Is that why you’re so invincible?”

Olivier had those answers, but she chose not to give them.

“That,” she said instead, “is none of your business.”

Zinnia took a deep breath.

“And now, if you’re done,” Olivier spoke again, “let’s go. It’s late.”

It really wasn’t, not to her standards at least, but she didn’t feel like her body could take another five hours on a chair, reviewing paperwork and tank documents.

Zinnia eyed the general’s tray and felt almost tempted to say it was still too full to just leave now, but Olivier had been right. It really was none of her business. She was just here because she couldn’t survive anywhere else, and that’s all that mattered tonight. Tomorrow would be a very different story.

Having been shown the way before, Zinnia remembered where they were going. She had expected to be taken to a much bigger room where living space was shared, so when she realized they were going back to Olivier’s quarters, she almost missed a step.

“Won’t you show me to where I’ll be sleeping before you dismiss me?” she asked. It would be a trip if they returned there and then Olivier told her she was supposed to find her own room by herself because goodnight was in order right now.

“That’s where we’re going,” Olivier said, without looking at her. She kept walking so Zinnia would too. The sooner they got there, the sooner she’d be able to lie down and forget about all this before it ate her alive. It’d been too many changes for just one day. Too many emotions.

“But…” Zinnia licked her lips. “This path goes to your bedroom.”

And this path was dangerously close to it already.

Olivier, with all the patience she could muster, which admittedly didn’t make for a great amount, tried to be reasonable.

“I’ve nowhere else to place you, as I said before,” Olivier said. “So that will have to do.”

Zinnia refused to take a step further. She was aware of how much this bothered the other woman, who clearly wanted to get there already and was constantly forced to go back on her steps.

“Sorry,” Zinnia said. “But no.”

Olivier scoffed.
“Fine, stay there, then” she said, and continued forward. She pushed her door open and almost closed it behind, but didn’t. She waited.

Zinnia didn’t take long at all to come knocking at it.

“I’ll sleep on the floor,” she stammered out as soon as she was inside. Olivier was already getting a couple of extra blankets from her drawers and setting them on the planks of wood hear the wall opposite to where the bed was.

“Doctor said to rest,” she said without turning her back to Zinnia. “You won’t rest there.”

“And you will?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not comfortable with that,” Zinnia said. “It’s your bed.”

Olivier stood up again, and Zinnia was painfully and very obviously reminded of the sheer power she gave off without even meaning to. This was magnified at will, and Zinnia, for a moment, remembered all those times in Iver when she’d felt insignificant yet somehow acknowledged in her presence.

Like I was a puny enemy she can crush with her thumb but chooses to let live, Zinnia thought. That same energy was being channeled now.

Six feet and two inches of unadulterated power stared back at her. Zinnia had to crane her neck up a little to face it head-on. Wherever she looked without turning her head, there was blue. Blue and gold.

“And you’re my guest.” Hurt that who it may, Olivier thought to herself. Which is mostly me. “So you’re taking the bed.”

With that, she took one of the pillows on the bed and sat down on the blanket she’d lain on the floor, then reclined until her back was against the floorboards. This was going to be a long night, it had certainly been a while since she’d slept in such conditions. A long, long while.

Olivier covered herself with another blanket, not bothering to change into different clothes. To do that, she’d have to get out of the room, since now she was sharing it and couldn’t just remove clothes willy-nilly. And she was too tired, and didn’t give enough shits.

With her back turned to the girl, she could only imagine by what she heard that Zinnia was, in fact and however much in reluctance, sitting down on the bed, and eventually letting her head touch the pillows. She even took a jumpy breath, like she liked the scent of the room and couldn’t really admit it to herself. The next breath flowed easier, gentler. It calmed Olivier down as well.

The silence that followed slowly loosened the knots in her body, and despite the hardness of the floor below her, she felt herself relax bit by bit.

“Fucking cold…” she heard Zinnia mutter so softly that for a second Olivier thought she’d misheard.

She didn’t move on her slapdash bed, but she made sure her voice would carry anyway.

“Winters are beautiful here,” she said.

She’d been witness to many. The mountains disappeared under layers of snow and ice, and the only
color in the world below her feet was the candid blue of the sky. And it was so cold that not a lot of animals ventured out, only her men would brave up nature during those months, and because they did so prepared.

Every year she welcomed the beginning of the colder season. For her, the sun always burned too hot in summer. She preferred the simplicity of winter. If cold, you could just add a layer or two, reinforce the material around the room. The heat made that impossible, and the military allowed no lighter version of the uniforms.

“Isn’t it October?” Zinnia replied a few seconds after, her voice sleepy.

Olivier rolled her eyes, even if the girl wouldn’t see it.

“Or is this like when you guys call summer anything that’s not fucking freezing temperatures?”

Olivier smiled.

“Basically,” she admitted. “Winter would be ‘fucking freezing’, then.”

Not yet, but soon. And that felt like a pleasant enough thought to fall asleep to, later.

“Good to know…” Zinnia whispered. She moved on the bed, the sheets rustled a little against her body. The dress Olivier had given her would probably be too large for her, she’d get tangled both in it and the sheets. “I look forward to seeing it but… you don’t have any big enough windows to appreciate the spectacle.”

The windows on Fort Briggs were small, yes, and a gift. Against an armed siege, they would defend them just as well as a truly impenetrable wall. But, admittedly, they weren’t very useful for admiring the landscape around the wall.

They had the top of the fort for that. Olivier knew for a fact some men liked to have late night watches so they could see the first light of the day illuminating the view. She, herself, found it a beautiful memory, to be up there when it got cold and gray and quiet, and then slowly witness the world come alive with the sun.

Careful, she rolled on the floor to look at Zinnia across her. Their eyes met in the darkness.

“I’ll have you taken to the top of the wall so you can see it,” Olivier muttered.

Zinnia grinned softly. She looked about to drift off to sleep, after so many hours and so many emotions.

“That’d be really nice, actually,” she said, and her smile grew a little.

Olivier thought, right this moment, that she could trust that smile.

“Sure…” she said.

And when she next opened her eyes, Zinnia’s own were closed, and she had fallen asleep with the ghost of that smile on her lips.

*Good night, flower girl,* Olivier thought.

Chapter End Notes
It's hilarious because this was written in July or so, and I had no idea I would actually be posting a chapter with an October reference in .... well, October XD

(also, @ writer brain: 9k. why do i have 2k and 9k chapters? what is this mess???)
Such terrible circumstances

Chapter Notes

"Such terrible circumstances aka I have no clue how to do this, help me" these are the actual notes from my Word document that precede the chapter XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light woke her. Before she opened her eyes, she expected the bitter cold gnawing at her limbs, the cool air into her lungs, and the anxiety of having to go through one more day in this unbearable wasteland.

Yet when Zinnia finally roused and took a look at what awaited her, that chilly breath she’d been expecting died before it was even taken. There was nothing cold or harsh in the image presented before her.

A sleeping beauty, hair sprawled over the floor like liquid sunlight.

It had not been a dream, after all. One doesn’t wake from a dream into a dream, and if one does, it feels different, like jelly in the stomach. This reality was solid. Zinnia’s bare feet hit the wood and it creaked, its surface rasped a little against her heels.

She was in the general’s room. She had slept there. She had been given shelter for the winter. She was safe.

And suddenly, in the soft cocoon of safety, with the same desperation a terribly full bladder gives you, she realized she needed to warn whoever was left in her life that cared that she hadn’t died in the cold.

Then, she could go back to letting them ignore her. But they needed to know. Anthony needed to know he had failed, and that others hadn’t. Again.

Again and always. His burden would be Zinnia’s salvation.

Zinnia supported her full weight on her feet now. She stood, and she looked around.

The general was sleeping right there. If she so much as took the wrong step, the woman would wake. And Zinnia could only cower in fear of the rage she could unleash onto the room if that happened.

So she moved slowly, biting down hard on her lip to keep herself from making any involuntary noise. She needed a phone, and breakfast, and more instructions. She would be expected to get a job now too. But she supposed they would guide her through all the necessary stages later today.

She was about to take the final step before reaching for the door handle when Olivier’s leg just… moved towards her ankle like an avalanche.

“Please no,” Zinnia said, but both legs collided, and she had to hug a wall in order not to fall. She’s… too strong, even when she’s sleeping.
But Olivier didn’t move again. So Zinnia went at it once more, slowly positioning her feet so she wouldn’t lose her balance in the jungle of limbs, slowly wrapping her fingers around the handle, getting ready to finally open the door.

And when it clicked and she was pulling, seeing the corridors’ lights, she had to immediately close it like she’d never even touched the vicinity of it.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Olivier said in her normal voice, like she didn’t get waking-up hangover like the rest of the mortals. When Zinnia turned around, hands behind her back, in a dress too long for her, she found that all that hangover was visible in the general’s face. Zinnia almost awed out loud. She also almost laughed.

It was so human. So imperfectly, beautifully human of Olivier.

“I… didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You haven’t. But you might as well just have,” Olivier said, standing up quickly. All the cute energy Zinnia had been picking up last night disappeared the second Olivier stood in front of her in all her tall glory. “Where were you going?”


“You can use my line, at my office,” Olivier said, clearly dismissing the subject. “Breakfast first, I assume?”

Zinnia looked at her, not very sure what she was supposed to do. She could just leave and stroll around until she found the office. Last night’s dinner had restored her energy a little, and she felt ready for the challenge. Eventually, as always, she would get to her destination.

“Right,” Olivier said, realizing the girl didn’t know where anything was in this place. “I’ll just have to show you the way. Again.”

“Thank you?” Zinnia said. It qualified as a kindness, but Olivier was playing it all of a sudden like it cost her more than just time. Like it was an awfully big favor Zinnia could never even hope to fully repay.

“Put your shoes on and wait for me outside the room,” Olivier said, then. “I won’t be long.”

A few minutes later, she emerged in an exact replica of the uniform she’d slept in, and had folded the old one to put it with the rest of the laundry, a few floors down.

First, they had breakfast with everyone else. Zinnia noticed a few tired faces in the crowd, and somebody was literally sleeping on one of the tables. She supposed they all had different schedules, to keep the fort operative and running twenty-four hours a day.

She thought she’d never get used to this. However she looked at it, she was imprisoned by the threat of freezing to death in the outdoors. She had to share living quarters with people of morally dubious approaches she’d never really trusted before and didn’t want to now.

She and Olivier attracted a few more curious glances that morning. Zinnia didn’t even waste time wondering why. They might as well have been the respective spokespeople for two warring nations, in all their differences. And it wasn’t just their mindsets, their whole lives that set them apart. Everybody around here wore blue uniforms and black coats, and Zinnia walked the same space in a gray dress that didn’t even belong to her.
Gray marked the spot.

After that, they left without a word, and Zinnia made sure to memorize the way so she wouldn’t need someone to take her there again, should she need to return. Despite all the corridors and doors looking the same, once she’d seen it, her chances of getting lost weren’t as high as they could be.

As soon as they were in, Olivier took off her gloves, and it became obvious that this room relaxed her, because it was territory she had absolute control over, even when she had to stay sitting there for hours. She pointed at the phone that normally only she used, trying not to remind herself that the girl could’ve very easily just called home from the common phone area, like everybody else.

“Make your calls,” she told Zinnia as she sat down, quite a while later than it was usual for her. Miles remained dutifully in silence in the table next to hers, feigning total indifference to what went on in this room unless it somehow involved him.

Zinnia did as told and dialed Anthony’s number.

She heard the ‘hello?’ on the other line and almost hung up on instinct. So sad, that she felt this way about someone she considered herself friends with. So sad, that her heart no longer attributed calling home to giddy excitement. Once, it’d been routine. Now, it was barely even duty.

“It’s Zin,” she said. “You said to call and I did.”

She listened to him make it all about him, about his worry, about how hard he’d tried to find someone to ride north with him, yet (unsurprisingly) nobody in their hometown was interested, and so he hadn’t pressed it. She as finding out, too, he hadn’t ever called North City after all.

“Yeah, yeah, well, I’m okay now, you won’t have to bother,” she interrupted him. “I’ll be here a while, so call me to this number.” She took a quick and unmeasured look at Olivier, in case she would object. It was her phone, after all. But the general’s gaze was empty and Zinnia took that as approval.

Anthony asked her where she was.

“Fort Briggs,” she only said. As soon as he said it back at her as a question, she hung up. She’d done all she felt compelled to. Now he knew she was alive and well and safe enough nobody would have to worry about her in a long time.

In contrast to what she’d felt this morning at the kitchens, this was now liberating her. Even if Anthony would probably call again, how long would he last on the phone with General Armstrong?

She almost smiled at the thought. He would pretend the line was quiet the second she picked up, that was for sure.

Coward, she thought. And the continued fiction of him reacting to the Ice Queen lifted her spirits a little as she literally stood there in a room where nobody was paying attention to her.

Anthony would run, Anthony would get so pale everyone would think him dead, Anthony wouldn’t get through an entire winter trapped inside a military fort. Not even with the nicest, blandest of troops.

Zinnia, though, had blushed in the presence of the general for months, sneaked out to help her in her shady professional endeavors, and written her words she would never, under any circumstances, ever hope to give other people. Maybe, just maybe, she wasn’t one to talk.
It still took a few more seconds before Olivier looked up from her maps and bullet lists and files and frowned at her.

“Are you about done?”

“Yes.”

Olivier stared at her. Zinnia wasn’t sure what she hoped to accomplish by scrutinizing her, but she let her anyway. She had nice eyes.

“Sit,” Olivier finally said.

Zinnia did. She felt once again like a ten-year-old kid going to the doctor and having to be there, all quiet and still, until they started asking her questions she never knew how to answer right.

“So?” she said now. Because she wasn’t ten nor a child. And in the light of day, it got easier to stand her ground before the woman who was known for mastering that very feat.

“So,” Olivier said, “your job.”

“What about it?”

“Do you have any preferences or can I just assign you to whatever I like?”

Zinnia thought about it.

“What do you got?”

Olivier smiled placidly, elbows on the table. She could almost hear Miles’s eyes on her, putting all of his senses onto spying on this conversation.

“For you?” Olivier teased. “Not much.”

“Well, obviously I’ll have to take it, whatever it is,” Zinnia counterattacked. The alternative was freezing her butt off under a worrisome amount of duvets.

When Olivier smiled again in the span of a minute, Zinnia’s heart gave a fluttery jump in her chest. Then it sank when the general spoke again, clearly knowing what she was doing.

“Kitchens,” she said.

“Kitchens?”

“You know where they are, so you won’t have any trouble getting down there.”

Zinnia gulped.

“I feel obligated to tell you I’m a disastrous cook.”

“It can’t be of that much impact to the already terrible food,” Olivier said slowly, like she was ready for all and any rebukes on her part.

“You’d be surprised…” Zinnia said under her breath. Her father hadn’t let her near food since the last culinary disaster of hers. She didn’t find it that distasteful, but then again when she was alone she had no choice but to eat what she prepared, and after so long she might’ve already grown used to it. Perhaps the only things she more or less didn’t suck at was molding bread and serving food other
people had cooked.

Olivier growled, as was typical of her when someone got on her nerves this specifically.

“Anything you have to say you can say loud and clear.”

“I said you’d be surprised.”

“I thought you had no choice.”

“And do I? You’re the one offering me a job, you should know.”

At this point, Olivier did hear Miles stifle a chuckle. She ignored him for now, but she had plans for him she knew he wouldn’t like.

“We could use reinforcement in all areas,” she said. “But the job at the kitchens is one that can’t be easily paired with mandatory tasks. So, if you don’t object to it, you would be more useful there than anywhere else, since you don’t have any training.”

Useful? Now it’s all about usefulness? Zinnia thought. She had to earn her stay and it sort of made sense they would try and make the most of out of her work. But… what did it matter where she was placed as long as she performed dutifully? Would she really be that terrible at another job?

“Alright, then,” she said in the end, crossing her arms.

Olivier then briefed her quickly and disinterestedly on the basics. Schedule, tasks, and the menu they’d been living off for years. Zinnia made sure to memorize all of it and was given a piece of paper, after a while of her just nodding, so she could write it all down in case she happened to forget. She would have to get up early, starting tomorrow, and then spend the majority of the morning and afternoon between cooking pots and hungry soldiers. A price she would pay dearly just for the faces of the first ‘lucky’ ones to savor her … masterpieces. For a moment, she hoped Olivier would be among them.

“Oh, and from now on,” Olivier finished, loud enough so Miles would be interrupted from whatever he was working on, “Major Miles will show you around. I simply don’t have the time.”

Zinnia almost vocalized her puzzlement. She was supposed to go around the fort with a complete stranger now? She could appreciate Olivier’s gentility in saying she no longer had the time, because it meant that in some way she’d thought at first to take that task upon herself. More likely just to watch over her and make sure Zinnia didn’t cause any ruckus, but still.

“Sir?” Miles said, clearly surprised

“Until she learns her way,” Olivier replied. “Shouldn’t take long.”

Zinnia nodded in apprehension. The major looked… normal enough, but he was big and his lips were perfectly straight, as if he had never smiled in his life. He covered his eyes with goggles, too. Nothing good ever hid behind men who concealed their identities like this, she thought. But this was Briggs, so perhaps it was just a fashion thing. She’d already seen people with questionable hairdos and a man with a metal arm.

“And I suppose you will need clothes, too,” Miles said, addressing Zinnia directly now.

Olivier, though, replied before she could.
“A few sizes less than me should do it,” she said. “I’m sure there has to be something in storage.”

Wait, he knows her measurements? Zinnia thought, without being able to stop herself. The images popping into her head were anything but pleasant to the eye.

“I’ll take a look at it right away,” Miles said, standing on his feet. Zinnia did too. She had to follow him now, closely and trying not to mistake him for another tall soldier in blue—there were many of those here. She thought of his name until she was more or less sure she wouldn’t forget it, which was never entirely guaranteed. “Miss, if you’ll come with me now…” he told her.

Zinnia stood where she was for a couple of seconds, looking at Olivier. Part of her wondered how … interesting it would have been, to have had to keep on following her places in order not to get lost. She had a feeling there wouldn’t be half as much banter with Major Miles. A pity, really.

“General,” Zinnia told her, as a way to say goodbye.

Olivier looked at her, but said nothing. She would have to get used to the flower girl calling her that now.

The complaints ended up being unbearable. Even the men who had spent literal decades of their lives there, who had survived on defrosted meat during the roughest years of the war, who had crossed the mountain range without weapons to settle the truce that had bought Amestris a few years, came in hordes to Olivier’s office like never before.

“It’s become inedible, sir. Downright inedible.”

“How much longer is the situation going to remain unaddressed?”

“So, now, on top of the extra shifts and the early cold, we have to put up with terrible food?”

Olivier could have hidden away from all of this. The exact amount of responsibility she had in all of this was null, at least in matters related to who to fry with questions and complaints and a collective insistence that made her wish these men weren’t the best at working as one sometimes.

Instead, she sat tall and proud, not bothering to look up from the paperwork of that morning. They would all leave eventually, when it got through to their thick little heads that she didn’t plan to move a finger. On rare occasions, the provisions that came all the way from North City’s quarters differed in quality from what the soldiers were accustomed to, but they would grow used to this, if they wanted to eat and preserve their job. That was the official version, at least.

But it was too much to leave it up to chance that the same day Zinnia had been appointed to work in the kitchens every meal had become a torment.

She wondered how on earth it was even possible for Zinnia to have lived that long on her own without learning how to properly cook an onion and how much of it to add to the dish. The onion disaster had been left almost untouched for a week, because it neither went bad nor lost consistency, and nobody dared to even try it.

On the second day, someone had returned from the patrols over the perimeter with a deer over their shoulder, and that night at least they’d had something decent to eat. Olivier shouted at them when she’d found out for neglecting their duties in favor of hunting, but when she saw the faces of the ten grown men she’d caught red-handed, she had to take it back. A famished batch of men would be of
less use to her than one who took the chance to shoot an animal down for food and pelt.

She announced, then, that anything any of them brought back to the fort would have to be properly shared, even mixed with the food—to wash it down more easily.

Even so, today here they were, filling her office with unnecessary noise.

*And here I thought we were prepping for war...* she thought to herself, somewhat amused. The food was bad, granted. But it could be worse. They could run out of it, and then they *would* be forced to hunt in freezing temperatures for months, until the first thawing of spring allowed decent transport to come in from the southern cities. It wouldn’t be the first time that happened, yet many men didn’t remember because they hadn’t been here yet.

The current loudness, though, was suddenly overridden by something even more thunderous. Footsteps on the corridor that parted the little crowd at the door and the huge silhouette of Captain Buccaneer against the light.

“General, this is a scandal!” he roared. “You wouldn’t just be sitting there if the emergency was a different one.”

Everybody else, finding it useless to continue screaming when Buccaneer’s voice definitely overpowered them all, quietened.

Olivier, finally, stopped working to look at her men. At the captain.

“I respond to the current alleged emergency, not the one you’re using as an excuse. Where are your manners, Captain? All these men were here before you.”

“And yet they’ve shut up.” Buccaneer lifted an eyebrow. Which made his frown all the more amusing to her. There he stood, a man capable of bringing carnage down on anyone with half a move, angry because he didn’t like the food. She felt tempted to refresh his memory. *Losing that arm was an emergency, this is just a nuisance. And Briggs doesn’t bow to nuisances.* “Because they recognize my authority.”

“All right,” she crooned with a smirk. She saw the eyes of her soldiers opening wide at the first name of the captain. She never used it, because she had guessed Buccaneer wasn’t very fond of it. It was like finding out he liked something embarrassing and telling the entire fort when normally he was the king of gossip. “Your so-called authority here is imaginary.” She scoffed and sneered at them all. “You come here with demands—explanations, an immediate change. You took the matter into your own hands once, like true men of Briggs, despite my initial insistence that it wasn’t honorable.”

Again, she pierced Buccaneer’s eyes with her own. She saw fear pooling in his, slowly, like stirring a mix. “You want things to be different? Then take them into your hands again and teach the girl how you like your porridge. Sort out your damn priorities, men.” She let him go, at last, looking at the room at large. “This is war, not your mothers’ kitchens.”

Dozens of eyes stared back at her.

“All right,” she said, and they followed. One by one, they exited the room.

All but Buccaneer.

His frown remained ever-present.

“At this rate, the men will stop eating.”
“You’ve heard me. If you want something done right, then *do* it. The men didn’t stop eating rancid meat. The men didn’t stop eating when all we had left was expired goods. This is not about the men, or the cause. Is it?”

Buccaneer stared back, unmoving.

“Give the girl another job,” he said. “If she must stay here, at least let’s make her useful.”

Miles suddenly roused from his usual pretend slumber to look at him.

“She is useful,” Olivier insisted. “The same way you are *not*, cluttering my office with insulting demands while you should be on the job.”

Buccaneer didn’t look at her, then. He looked back at Miles.

She slammed the table, and not as loudly as she could have.

“You’re wasting my time,” she told him.

She held Buccaneer’s gaze then, and after a few seconds, he left in silence, still pouting.

How much longer would she have to put up with this nonsense? She wondered. When had her soldiers become such buffoons?

But, in the back of her head, that voice hummed: *they have a point, you know? Why defend the girl?*

Olivier took a deep breath and forced herself to look at the task this last visit had made her leave unfinished. She wasn’t defending anyone. She was prioritizing, and a girl with terrible cooking skills in a kitchen inside a fort she needed to defend with her life definitely was not and would never be a priority.

Getting weird looks in the corridors had started to be a problem. This wasn’t her fault and she knew it. She had given out her warning—*beware, I cannot cook to save my life*—and nobody had listened, now it was too late to either back out or blame herself.

The hilarity of the situation only lasted a few days, in which the kitchens were very very quiet during lunch, much to her surprise. She’d smirked to herself as she stirred her odorous concoctions and smiled meekly at Olivier, who ate every last mouthful of it, almost defying her. That woman had to have a stomach coated in iron or something, because literally nobody else—including Zinnia—could finish an entire meal on one sitting. The trick was to get used to the taste and musky texture, and then face the challenge slowly.

Now the soldiers ate but she could tell they wished they didn’t have to. Some that had started out being friendly to her had taken a liking to glare at her when they walked past her in the corridors, as if she could do anything to solve this. No matter how many cooking books she read and studied, no matter how many years she’d been preparing food, it was always this heart-breaking to put in your mouth.

And it wasn’t supposed to be affecting her. She’d withstood the biting remarks of her mother years ago, and she’d killed her own taste buds in order to remain alive after moving out. Zinnia *knew* very well what she lacked in culinary activities. But was the distinct stink-eye they were giving her necessary, when it had been someone else who had let her take the job and didn’t really seem to
mind keeping her there?

It got boring and sad, after a few days. And, worst of all, lonely. Nobody talked to her other than to ask, sometimes, if there wasn’t another dish she could serve. When she shook her head, they moved their trays away. And when she went to bed at night, smelling like beef and flour, Olivier wasn’t there either, and wouldn’t be for a few hours. Some nights, when she walked in, Zinnia woke up from her slumber, as if to confirm she was there at last. Then, she fell back asleep.

They didn’t talk. Nobody talked to her. And she had nothing to do all day except wander around and work. So far, she’d found nothing of interest. Just bunks and showers and the laundry room, and huge spaces that seemed to take up half a floor at least. She had walked out at once, she had no interest in half-built tanks and the rest of the weaponry. It wasn’t hard to imagine that blood had been shed because of that, and would continue to be.

Their country, after all, rested upon the foundations of war and blood spillage. And the military was the only force that would ever answer for it.

She decided, one day, that perhaps the solution to her boredom was closer than she’d thought. To be more precise, hiding in her old room at Iver.

She found herself walking to Olivier’s office.

“What’d you want?” Olivier barked before the door was even pushed open. Today, it was budget day. Approve this, reject this. Send an angry letter to Central explaining how the hell they were supposed to last on last month’s rations for another four weeks. She was expecting nobody today, especially not after the little lecture that seemed to have worked, since no one else had come to complain since.

She looked up just in time to see Zinnia, in the blue uniform that Miles had found for her time ago—the only clothes they all had to offer her.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Zinnia said. She had seen how everyone behaved around Olivier, and while she had no real idea if that’s how it was customary to address a general, she did her best. She wanted to fit in, at long last. Or, at least, be invisible enough that people would neither bother her nor be bothered by her presence. “But I have a favor to ask.”

Olivier outright laughed out loud.

“And what would the little dove need of me today?”

Zinnia shivered at the nicknamed and wondered what on earth she could have in common with a bird, let alone a little dove.

“I don’t need anything. I just wanted to know if there was any way I could go back to town.”

Olivier’s soul fell from her mouth, catastrophically crashing against the table until Zinnia kept talking:

“There’s nothing for me to do here except cook, and the days are long,” Zinnia brushed her bangs away. They were so long already, soon she’d be able to comb them behind her ears. “So I thought I would ask to go and retrieve my things.”

Olivier quickly grasped at her slippery soul to get it back. Nothing to run away from here. Nothing to worry about.
She frowned.

“Do you want your things? That’s it?”

“It wouldn’t take long. Just a day. I’d ride, grab some stuff, and ride back.”

Olivier shook her head. What if she got lost, and then she had to send an entire battalion to go look for her? Worse. What if she ran away or was captured by Drachma, and they’d never be able to tell which since both options entailed being kept in the dark?

Her final excuse, though, sounded almost convincing.

“You’re not used to the cold. I’ll send someone else.”

“I was in that house for days. This is just one day. Nothing will happen.”

“You’re not expendable. If you leave, who will fill in for you?”

Zinnia raised an eyebrow. She was the closest thing to ‘expendable’ Olivier would ever seen, yet she was saying the opposite.

“Who was doing my job before I came here?”

Olivier leveled the game up, clenching her teeth.

“Men who now work at what they should: keeping the border safe.”

Zinnia only hesitated for a moment.

“Men who wouldn’t know what I need, and who you’d still be ordering to do something that’s not their job.”

Olivier ignored that last part. She had the feeling she wasn’t winning at this.

“Make a list, then,” she said. “I’ll give it to whoever rides down.” And before Zinnia could complain, Olivier added: “And I assure you, my men are very apt at following orders.”

Zinnia snorted.

“So I’ve heard, yeah.”

As Zinnia stole a piece of paper from Miles’s desk and a pen to write on it, Olivier’s frown grew more and more pronounced. There was only one reason the girl wanted her things now. And it brought a cascade of relief to her mind. It meant she hadn’t done that much of a bad job, letting her in, giving her something to do.

“Planning on staying, then?” Olivier asked.

Zinnia looked up at her at once.

“I might as well. I’ve nowhere else to go.”

When she saw how Olivier’s face softened slightly, Zinnia panicked. She had just admitted out loud that this place, huge and lonely and boring, had washed over her as her much needed salvation.

“The—um—the closest place I could travel to is… half a country away, so…” she added, trailing
off. Why the fuck was she thinking of how to justify this? She was here, she had been invited to be, the rest of it was information nobody needed to have. Especially not the general. *Oh god especially not her...*

“Well,” Olivier said, and she sounded pensive. It was a big change from the usual grunt or yell, “you’re welcome here, as long as—”

“As long as I work,” Zinnia scoffed. “Yeah, I know. I’m working.”

She didn’t know how to view this. This woman had saved her, given her shelter, taught her how to survive in said shelter, and then just… left her to meander on her own, never to speak to her again until now.

Olivier rubbed at her lower back. Zinnia almost felt guilty. She had saved her, sheltered her, gave her a job, and given her her own bed.

“Do you have it ready?” Olivier asked. Professional again. Professional for practically the first time. She’d been nothing but an angry figure of authority with too much to do and no desire at all to do anything but look intimidating.

“Oh, the list…” Zinnia said, quickly leaning forward to give it to her. She crossed her legs as Olivier read through it, trying to make herself smaller. “As you can see, it’s not a lot of stuff that I… need.”

Olivier made a noise in approval.

*Books, notebook, clothes.* And she was going to orchestrate a trip just for those three things. If the girl had asked, Olivier would have pointed her in the direction of the library, grabbed a stack of paper and put it on her desk in their room, and given her more than just two uniforms to wear. But the girl had instead requested this.

A man and a horse, that was all it would take. Not that big of a sacrifice.

“You could—I mean, there’s also food, if you want to… you know, bring it back,” Zinnia said, her voice a little less confident. “I’ve noticed my… meals aren’t all that popular with your men.”

Olivier smiled at her.

“Their stomachs have grown complacent. They’ve forgotten that in times of war what is more important isn’t the food itself but the fact that we have it.”

“Okay, then… Just, well, if you wanted to write it down as well… there’s cans and stuff.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Olivier actually looked at her with humanity in her eyes, understanding, and maybe even a little bit of pity. “And return to your post.”

Zinnia nodded, got up and left. She had no idea that was the gentlest dismissal Olivier had offered in a long, long time.

“She’s coming, she’s coming. Stand straight,” Austin whispered to his fellow soldiers from Central. They all immediately went from resembling blue cooked spaghetti to the soldest planks of wood.

“At ease” she grumbled, clearly having heard them. She approached only Austin. “You. Saddle a horse; I have a *very* important mission for you.”
She watched, not without some amusement, how his companions made proud faces at him as Austin himself blushed intensely.

“For… for me?”

Olivier nodded.

“Of utmost importance,” she said. Then, she handed over to him the list the flower girl had drafted. “I want you to retrieve this from the yellow house at Iver. And I want you back before nightfall.”

“Sir, I… thank you so much for trusting me with this.”

She judged him with her eyes for a few seconds until he self-corrected.

“I mean… Yes, sir. Of course, sir. At once,” he stuttered.

“And cover yourself up appropriately, soldier. It’s cold today,” she said before she kept walking on, leaving the flock of hens to fangirl over Austin’s new little mission so she could visit Buccaneer for any news of the Mountain Men.

The border remained protected, even if both sides had people pooling around it, waiting to see who had the guts to shoot first. And whatever happened, Olivier’s side would hold until the end of times.

“More sightings, but no attacks,” Buccaneer told her.

He seemed to have gotten over the whole food ordeal, at least in relation to her shutting him up in public and not exactly through gentility and understanding.

“If they keep mimicking us,” she said, “we still play with field advantage. And the surprise factor as well. Such like in chess…”

“I don’t feel they’re going to, General. More like just… studying us. They never cross over the border, and their weapons are always down. And that’s when they bring them.”

Olivier sighed.

“I wonder what the hell they’re up to. Because it’s clear to me the question is no longer if they are.”

“Maybe they’re just following orders. And there’s no way we can have access to those, is there?”

“Not without actively getting our hands on the information. And that’s not acceptable.”

“I can go, sir.”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“They’ll sniff you right out, Buccaneer.”

“I can be stealthy when the situation requires it.”

“Stick to your job, leave outsmarting Drachma to me.”

“Good luck with that…”

“No more spies?”

“No more spies, that we know of.”
Olivier frowned.

“Interrogate the last batch Central sent us.”

“That’ll… take a while.”

“Excellent, then,” she said. “It will keep your mind off the glory you hope to attain out there, Captain.”

“It’s not about the glory. It’s about serving you right.”

Olivier put a hand on his metal arm.

“You serve me right, by listening. I don’t need a legion of martyrs. I need soldiers who will be ready to march into battle with the conviction to win, even without me. Are you still one of those, Julian? Or do you continue to want things Briggs can’t give you?”

“Outsmarting them… can’t be done without actually knowing the plan that they think makes them smarter than us.”

“Like I said, leave that to me. You make sure we don’t have a mole.” Which she already knew they didn’t. But it did indeed give him something to distract himself with. “And keep me informed.”

The truth was that Olivier didn’t worry now, not like during times past. She’d wasted her chance at truly getting inside the head of Drachma’s leaders, but she still had the higher ground. Briggs would outlast any siege, even on such terrible food. And on an open battlefield, with the fully-functioning tanks now that they’d found the antifreeze oil, the upper hand was theirs even if Drachma had powered up as well.

These days, Olivier worked herself to unhealthy extents to preserve the order of things. Subtly give this man a task that would boost his self-esteem and make him feel welcome at last; beat Mauser over and over until she was certain he had interiorized a new maneuver; keep up with Miles’s extensive updates of the daily schedules and everything new that was incorporated; give Buccaneer a ball of wool to play with while she figured out how to get her hands on better materials.

A healthy and content army would get them far. She’d always believed that much. And she always refused to count herself as part of that army. She was just the one who had united them, now it was up to them to move forward. If anything, she would push them a little from behind, where they would barely notice.

And the fact that nobody seemed to see the point to which this had become overworking was another victory. Miles would worry, and Miles would get through to her if he knew. But she’d made sure nobody did, maybe not even herself. Not this time.

The food, the sleeping situation… It all came out of one of those macabre novels she’d liked in her youth about enchanted forests crawling with dark magic and creatures of the fae trapping you within by means of showing you beauty beyond compare and otherworldly treasures. Everything had become part of a spell in which Olivier put her own needs in the last place because it was the right thing to do—because in excusing herself on the ‘right thing’, she didn’t have to admit why she really did it.

Her back hurt now almost all day, after spending her nights in almost direct contact with the hard
floor. And she’d developed an even greater tolerance to the worst of meals. If she ever had Iver’s tiramisu again, she would probably dissolve in happiness from how good it tasted in comparison to all of this.

The right thing… Fuck the right thing.

The food, the sleeping situation, and sending Austin off on a ridiculous mission. He had brought everything on the list. And now Olivier’s room looked just like it would if it was just Zinnia living there.

Everybody paying attention would object to it being the right thing. The right thing would have been to end it, to send her back to her family, and let Briggs continue doing their thing.

Thank god nobody saw past what she’d put up for them to see. A lost sheep who couldn’t cook and a very fierce lion who could bite anyone who came too close.

Perhaps if the sheep and the lion spent more time together in public Olivier’s secret would stop being a secret and finally evolve into the final stage of it she was deeply terrified of: gossip. Buccaneer and Miles sitting together somewhere, giggling like schoolgirls about the possibility. Always the possibility. She would make them do dishes after work for months, if she caught them.

But they never would now, unless they stepped into her own room one night and saw—well—the situation.

Because outside that room, the only time of day Olivier would be around the flower girl was at lunch and dinner, and occasionally Zinnia would go on her own lunch break and they would sit at the same table and perhaps, sometimes, talk.

How was her day going? Zinnia would ask.

Fine. How was Zinnia’s? Olivier would reply, rubbing at her back sometimes without being able to help it, and praying so that the girl wouldn’t ever find out why. That would make for an awkward conversation.

How on earth had they ended up back at awkward conversation? After those many attempts at normalcy and those occasional moments in which Olivier had glimpsed for a second something more than just politeness. Then again, her job was to anticipate, to see what wasn’t even there in case it ever was. She’d underperformed this time in that regard.

At night, there would be no performance at all. The darkness hid anything she usually worked through a filter or two. The darkness and the angle, working together to help her from facing reality.

War, she was ready for. Insubordination. Starvation. A cruel winter. A woman on her bed—not so much. And she would need to pay another visit to the doctor for her sore back to pay for that. To pay for stupidity and weakness.

At Briggs only the strong survive.

Where is your strength, Armstrong? She asked herself, as she opened the door to the room. Her heart always forgot to beat when she did so late at night, after so many hours working with Miles until he left and frowned at her, then kept on giving it her best. It eventually calmed down as she stepped in, took off her boots, and settled on the floor, her new home. A much better home.

Today was no different. The breath was knocked out of her, then it returned before she could feel anxious. The sight continued to be shocking, nevertheless. The girl hobbled all the blankets and slept
all curled up, like she was afraid the monster at the end of the bed would lick her toes.

Olivier sighed. Such a little thing. Another one of her could fit in the bed, which wasn’t precisely large as far as beds went.

Late as it was—later than usual—today she took her clothes off. Sleeping in them all the time couldn’t be good. And perhaps wearing actual sleepwear would help her body remember it was supposed to fall asleep and not lay awake, thinking about things outside of her control.

She was caught with her pants down, literally.

Zinnia turned on the bed, opened her eyes, and upon sensing that Olivier was there, she sat on the mattress, rubbing her face. She wasn’t used to getting her sleep interrupted.

“What time is it?” she asked in a mutter.

Olivier didn’t bother covering herself. Dark, again.

“Four in the morning,” she said. “Go back to sleep.”

“I fell asleep.” Zinnia yawned, like a kitten. All wrinkly nose and teeth. “I wanted... to wait for you.”

“What for?”

“The sleeping situation. You must be uncomfortable down there.”

Olivier growled.

“Just go back to sleep.”

“I’m serious,” Zinnia said in her sleepiest of voices. “Switch with me.”

Olivier’s mouth dropped.

“It’s only fair,” Zinnia continued.

“Explain to me how. The floor is not that bad a place to sleep on.”

“I know. That’s why I want to switch with you.” Zinnia said. Then she yawned again.

“Listen, I’ve no time for this now. Will you just get back in bed?”

“General—”

“I’m not your general.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Are you always this annoying?”

“Answer me this: if it were the other way around, would you let me sleep on the floor?”

Unbeknownst to Zinnia, Olivier felt it was an unfair question. Because, if their roles were turned around, of fucking course she wouldn’t let her take a patch of cold floor. Maybe someone else, but not her. Not a girl used to comfort and niceness.
Lies, she told herself off. Anybody else would be sleeping here. But this girl isn’t anybody else. What’s the harm in admitting it?

Miles, Buccaneer, judgment, death. That was the harm.

If it were the other way around, would Zinnia be doing this too? Or would she have let Olivier find her own luck in the middle of the blizzard?

Probably the latter.

But it was four am. And Olivier needed sleep like she needed air. And nothing was helping. Especially not this. She thought about her back, about the hours she spent sitting down on an office, about the uncertainty and tiredness of this war that began but never got anywhere. And she caved in.

She just wanted to sleep. Why did this girl have to care so much? Couldn’t she just take the fucking bed without complaining? Couldn’t she just take all of this gratefully and in silence? Was that truly so hard?

She exhaled in the end. Why did she always cede? What did this woman have that Olivier didn’t feel she was capable of conquering?

“Fine,” she ended up saying. “But just for tonight.”

“We can rotate, if that makes you feel more comfortable,” Zinnia said, getting off the bed slowly, standing next to her in almost complete darkness. “I just don’t want to see you in pain because of me.”

Olivier’s entire mold of existence melted.

What? What had she just heard?

She sat down on the mattress she both missed and couldn’t let herself to miss, and she looked at Zinnia as she got comfortable on the planks on wood. She was condoning this. She was an active participant of it. And she would pay dearly—she would pay, she wanted to pay.

_I just don’t want to see you in pain because of me._

“That’s fine,” she said, lying on her back. She didn’t dare move, like she would be letting a dangerous beast out in doing so.

_I just don’t want to see you in pain because of me._

That sentence would resonate that night in Olivier’s dreams, and for longer, even, in her waking thoughts. You didn’t just recover from hearing such a thing coming from a perfect stranger.

Or… maybe Zinnia was no longer a perfect stranger. Maybe she was that weird person that was in your life a minimum amount and still ended up affecting it.

But not a stranger. Not anymore. Olivier wasn’t sure when that change had taken place, yet she was positive it had.

_I just don’t want to see you in pain because of me…_ How could she not be sure after this?

How could she not be sure, after she finally dared bury her face in the pillow and found nothing but the certainty that it smelled like the flower girl?
oh god I'd completely forgotten that I gave Buccaneer a first name in this chapter XD. You can't even imagine how much fun that day was, getting to choose the most ridiculous and yet slightly dignified name

also, for some reason, I really like this chapter, even in hindsight. I like how silly it is, at heart <3
The past is my closet

The morning brought her nothing new. A feeling in her stomach she couldn’t shake completely, and the realization that if it didn’t move elsewhere, she would have to house it, nurture it, call it her own.

A feeling with a name and possibly a surname, and a life beyond the four walls of Briggs. A feeling that became harder and harder to repudiate. Especially that morning, especially after the night before.

Olivier rose early, as she used to. And nothing hurt. And she, for once, didn’t feel like the few hours of sleep she’d gotten had been insufficient. She had slept immersed in youth like she hadn’t tasted in a long time.

But as soon as she had sat on the mattress that no longer felt as just hers, she saw Zinnia curled up in a tiny ball on the floor, with the rough blankets wrapped around her in a twisted mess, and her breath caught from guilt.

And it wasn’t a common emotion for her. She led with pride, she conquered in anger, and she lived by duty and diligence. Guilt was never allowed entrance, because it had no place in her life. Sometimes, of course, her mistakes led to one or two especially sleepless nights and restless days, but she never felt this terribly anguished about it. She had killed, she would kill again, and yet that hadn’t tortured her this intensely back in the day—or, at least, not in this very manner. Death was always something to feel over, but life… life in its delicateness made Olivier fear her own choices in order to do right by it.

And last night she had forfeited her own promises and let the girl take the floor.

She almost picked Zinnia up from there now to dump her on the bed, carelessly. You landed me here, now take that. Rest easy. I want no involvement in this.

But she didn’t. She put her clothes on, tightened the laces on her boots, and got down to the kitchens. Perhaps she should’ve waken Zinnia up, since she worked there and should already be up and serving breakfast, but for some reason she felt incapable of such a crime. The girl had stayed up for hours just to suggest this new change of plan. How could Olivier pay her back with this? How could she even do a thing to disrupt her sleep?

If she had seen this scene from the outside rather than being the one to live it, Olivier would’ve yelled at herself for a long time. Since when did she allow for this kind of thing to happen?

At the kitchens, though, she recovered her will to yell at people in general when she saw the chaos one absence had ensued. People pooling at the back of the room, complaining loudly and arguing because the girl wasn’t there and suddenly no one knew how to work a coffee machine and a spatula. She grabbed her own cup, took some grainy bread for herself, and yelled at them:

“Do you people seriously not know how to behave in public?”

“But, sir, how are we supposed to do anything if she’s not here?” someone asked.

“And how did you do things before she wasn’t? Did you perhaps not know how to serve yourselves, you idiots?”

At first she wanted nothing but silence and space to calm herself down. Fools, all of them. And she was the biggest one of them all. Pretending to be fine and never thinking of why she wasn’t. The girl. Another girl after too long. She’d entirely forgotten how this went, or how it could go.
She hadn’t even been able to wake Zinnia up. Who did that? Who, in the middle of this rusty nowhere, stopped on their tracks to show kindness for just anybody? None of this made sense.

When she saw where she had taken herself, trapped among books and dust, she wanted to stay in there forever. Until she remembered what being there meant. Hiding, like a school girl from ages ago. She was thirty-five. Her teenage years were barely a shadow to her present, yet she’d been entirely swallowed by a new darkness.

It was one thing to flirt with Miles just because she knew it would piss him off, not because she ever had any interest. He was a man, after all. It was one thing to pretend to be above these things, to strive never to care romantically about other people. But this? This absurdity couldn’t be blamed on anything else but fact.

_I have brought home a taste of my own medicine_, she thought.

Home. When had she had one in the first place? The mansion? This fort? The academy? She had known nothing else. Her homes had never been places but people, and the last time had been a long time ago. She had never thought she would be able to choose her own family again.

Not that she’d actively chosen it this time.

She sat down at the table she’d long ago called her own, and after a while she grabbed a random book out of the shelves. She dusted it first, then sat down to read.

The concepts weren’t unknown to her, she’d just never actually found them useful or appealing. Alex had. Alex had made his entire life revolve around magic and his fucking biceps. Like he was the only one with the family surname—and he might as well just have been, he was the only man of the Armstrong siblings.

Her merits had always weighed less than his, for the simple fact that she was no man, and she was too old and too rude to ever amount to anything. Back then, she’d still been in the academy, and her graduation was nearing. Her brother’s calling had tasted like betrayal.

It would always, from then on, taste like betrayal.

She had never been able to look at him the same way. He’d become mama’s boy.

_“How wonderful, dear!”_ their mother said the day Alex had announced his new goal proudly as ever. _“Our boy wants to be an alchemist!”_

_Mr Armstrong was sitting at their living room table reading a newspaper. He paid attention to little else that wasn’t printed words or the radio. His family was always only background noise._

_“Ah yes, yes, marvelous,”_ he said.

_“Isn’t he a little young?”_ Olivier herself had said. _She’d already known, at Alex’s age, that she wanted to join the military, and like her before him, he would still have to wait a few years. She wasn’t even sure he would like it there._

_“That’s a small matter,”_ their mother said. _“He’s such an able boy, he might even be accepted earlier!”_

_Little spoiled Alex had been saying he wanted to do this ever since she had enrolled. And what was worse, he’d worked for it. The books in the mansion had piled up, and every time she’d looked for something to read, she only found alchemy everywhere. He hadn’t even meant to be a soldier, just..._
an alchemist. And nobody had seen the difference or even cared about it but her.

Who by that time had already been top of her class. Who by that time had already gotten on the nerves of every superior. Who by that time was hiding her own life from her family because no one wanted to understand.

“I will bring honor to this family, like my sister before me,” Alex said. But those words weren’t the main focus of anything. Because their parents saw no honor in what she’d done, only a spot on their stainless reputation.

She’d had to rise above it all. That’s what that life had taught her. Homeschooled by the best, dressed by the best, and still her mother would forever be disappointed that Olivier wasn’t what they’d expected of her. A girl of such a wealthy family, about to graduate from military academy, husbandless and without attending university. She was a disgrace, not the one to bring honor. When she was present at family parties, she was kept on the side like a pet, sitting alone at the table until she emerged, her height setting her apart from the crowd. Her father had still tried to introduce her to young impressionable men—the poor man had never been too observant of what went on in his family’s life—and, luckily, he’d never looked too disappointed when they all walked away, scared and disgusted in equal parts at the eccentricity of the eldest of the Armstrong family.

Her mother scoffed at Alex’s words.

“What honor could she bring?” she said. “A black sheep won’t ever belong, my dear Alex.”

“She has followed her calling, and I daresay she is quite successful.”

“Successful?”

“Why. Is she not, mother?”

“You will be. Because that’s how things are meant to be. Not… her. She should stay home and learn to behave like a lady.”

Olivier had left the room then. She had no intention of hearing this again, now in front of her brother, who was still impressionable enough that their mother’s words could change the way he saw her. True, Alex was clingy and wouldn’t leave her alone if she was home, but she still didn’t want him to become the person their mother kept meaning for him to be. A person who would see Olivier for who she was, a woman that swam against the current and would always do so, because defying them all was apparently more important than being in the family.

Olivier didn’t think she’d sat down ‘like a lady’ in… literally longer than that. Now, her only reflex when she was on a chair was to keep her legs always apart. She’d never been a lady. She’d never wanted to be, either.

It was all about people and what they wanted, always contrasting with what she wanted.

“Olivier,” Alex called after her.

“What do you want now?” she said, without turning around. “Scram, kid.”

“You know she didn’t mean it.”

At this, she spun on her heels to frown at him.

“Oh, she did. It doesn’t matter now. There’s little she can do about it.”
“I just wanted to ask you… if you thought this was worth pursuing.”

She hadn’t looked down at him that time. He had still been her sweet but disastrous little brother, a little duckling who would follow her everywhere. She had always been his favorite. Amue and Strongine didn’t really pay much attention to him, they were busy dating the men their mother had chosen, going down the only path that had been set for them. Alex liked that his older sister didn’t.

She tried to imagine him going into instruction. Her body had learned to get used to the severity of the force, the punishments and the lack of praise, the brutal sexism, the long hours of work that didn’t pay off. But Alex was... soft, in all senses of the word. His body was weak, and he was too used to the simple rich life. He had never crawled through the dirt, he had never had his clothes stolen, his intellect challenged by fools who thought themselves better on account of their gender.

Was this something he wanted for himself—truly—or just another one of those things he did because of her?

This time, Olivier didn’t make a face at him. She would, many many times in the future. But not now. Because where he stood, she had as well.

“What do you hope to get out of it?” she asked him instead.

He paused to think, and she took that as a good sign. That meant he valued her opinion enough to not just say the first thing that came to mind. He knew the importance of well-thought honesty.

“I will protect the weak and march alongside the strong to build a better country. I will make our family proud.”

She laughed heartily.

“That’s all? I’d been hoping for something a little more… topic-related.”

He looked puzzled.

“Was that not?”

“Are you ready to risk your life, time and time again, for people who hate you, people who look down on you, people who don’t want to be saved?”

He went quiet all of a sudden. It appeared that had never made it into his precious calculations. He knew many rules of the alchemists by heart, but he had never thought of this?

“This is for life, Alex. There’s no going back; do, and you’ll be a deserter. If you want this, want it for a personal reason. Because the world—and your precious mother—won’t always be proud of you and your sacrifices.”

Then he asked her something that threw her off completely, something she’d expected less than his compliance.

“Why did you do it?”

And she hadn’t been brave and soldier-like enough to answer honestly, to tell her sixteen-year-old brother that she’d joined the military to run away from home, to prove her worth somewhere where it wouldn’t be deemed nothing, even if it wouldn’t be talked up either; that she’d joined because their mother would never let her exist as Olivier, as the daughter she hadn’t raised but merely watched
grow up in disdain.

A lesbian and a soldier was better than just a closeted lesbian. She would gain power, and experience, and she would learn a trade where she wouldn’t be required to keep her legs closed when she sat, or chew demurely, or learn the subtle dances of flirting with wealthy and wealthily stinking men. She would develop her personality against tide and wind and dust, and she would do it her way, she would fight the battles she herself would choose.

How could Olivier tell Alex—sweet, little Alex—that she was soon to become a soldier because she hadn’t been able to stand being just a daughter?

And so she didn’t. Not that time, not ever.

“Mind your own business,” she said. “And mind it well, or abstain from joining.”

Later on, she attended her own graduation alone, dressed in permanent blue, and she was given her final instructions before leaving the academy for good. She had been assigned a post up north, the least desirable destination, the last place everyone wanted to go to. Top of her class, graduating early… Even the military couldn’t stomach a woman threatening to climb up the ranks so early as her results pointed at, so they’d sent her to the only place where they thought all of that excellence would be crushed out of her. They’d really thought they could teach her a lesson, they’d really thought their influence on her existed at all.

And two years later, when she was already well-settled on Fort Briggs, a few ranks higher than anybody had expected, she’d received notice that her little brother Alex was training to be a soldier, like she before him.

She’d never seen him after her own graduation, and after Ishval… she wished she never had to again.

Now, though, here she was, wasting time on the memory of him. That fucking traitor, she thought. I warned him and yet there he went. And they said I would be the one to bring dishonor.

She would never forgive him that. She had forgiven many other things, years ago. Just not this. Not this, Alex, Olivier thought. You can’t say I didn’t warn you.

She slammed the book closed. All those paragraphs she’d read about alchemy were starting to make her head hurt, and not precisely because of their content but because of the emotional backlash.

A soldier and an alchemist, she thought. A deserter.

Her brother had become those three words, and the memory of a scrawny kid who once had aimed to be like her. When she thought of him now, she couldn’t imagine him as a grown man. She still saw the almost seven feet of boyhood he’d been when she’d last seen him. Sometimes, though, soldiers from other settlements spoke hushedly about him—the vastness of a man who had cowered in the face of Ishvalan terrors and found shelter in bureaucracy and gentler uses of his alchemy. Their words about Alex were never unkind, but she couldn’t ignore the contempt in their voices, and she wished she could intensify it until it made her sore in the throat. A man should never leave the battlefield without an order for retreat, no matter his connections and no matter his ties to the rest. Others, nevertheless, spoke of him in other manners, and she pretended she wasn’t listening.

A soldier, an alchemist, a deserter. And a kind man.

She wondered if he was all muscle now, if he still kept something of his surname in him, or if he’d become something else entirely, like she had.
Before she knew it, her methods had worked. Thinking about something different brought something different to her routine, and for a moment she was swept away from her melancholy and her dread. Duty called and she answered quickly as always.

When she was called down to the Engineering Department, she’d been somewhere mulling over her life choices, and she welcomed the change gladly. If she had to hear another one of her subordinates complaining about food or the cold or the schedule, she was going to begin contemplating the thought of burying herself in sword-fighting until winter was over. They could handle themselves for all she cared.

Luckily, and at last, a new and much improved version of the Briggs tank was fresh out of the oven, and as she had commanded them to do a long time ago, if the beast worked, she wanted to be the one to give it the green light. She hoped it would be the last green light in this project. They had gotten their hands on the special fuel the engineers had insisted on, they had repaired previous defects on the exterior, they had made the inside ample and comfortable, and they had retouched the ammunition several times already.

This had to be it.

It wasn’t like they couldn’t win a fight on an open field, especially in the mountains, even more especially in the winter. But Olivier had always thought it a good idea to make it very clear they were the ones on the border, and that they would remain there much much longer than Drachma would exist as a nation.

*You want to step on Amestrian grounds?* She would say from the top of the tallest peak. *Over my dead body! I will dig our flag onto your barren lands before you can even decide you’re scared enough to run like dogs back to your houses.*

That victory was nothing but a distant dream. The true development would be to stay where she was, defend the border like she always had, and teach the next generations well so that they wouldn’t embarrass her after she left her post.

Olivier found that the news of the tank being operative and successfully so had spread over the fort. There were a few gatherings of her men, who she assumed were on their breaks, animatedly discussing the model and wishing out loud they’d be allowed to drive one.

The man in charge came to shake her hand.

“It’s all ready for you, sir,” he said. “Whenever you give the order we shall start.”

She shook his hand respectfully and nodded, indicating that they could begin at once. The engineer cleared his throat to ask for silence, then briefly commented on the display that would take place, and finished by advising that everyone stayed within a safety distance of the tank.

Then, he turned to her again.

“General, if you would like to test it out yourself…”

She raised an eyebrow. The first version of this machine had burst out in flames, she didn’t really want to be in the belly of one if that happened again, but it looked solid enough, and there had been plenty of modifications since that first model.
“Very well, then,” she said.

On reflex, he offered her a hand to help her up. She snorted to herself and climbed in with enviable elegance. She knew he would regret that till the day he died just by the sight of his face after he got in as well.

She also knew, at long last, that this tank was definitely the best one yet, and that she didn’t have that much to comment on for more changes.

At her command, it glided, its aim was spotless, and it withstood open fire as well just like she had wished it. When the test was done, the interior of the tank smelled faintly like gunpowder, and she could barely contain her pride. Finally, a wrap on this program and on to something else.

Something wet and itchy drenched her stomach in anxiety. If this was over, she would have time again to do something she knew she shouldn’t do.

Miles and Buccaneer arrived to the trials of the tank later than the rest of them, but still got to witness the best moments of it. Buccaneer roared instead of giggled when he saw the size of the bullets it would spit out at the enemy, and Miles had to politely remind him that it wasn’t very likely he would ever get to drive one of those. Neither of them would.

Yet it still made them proud, to imagine the man who got to follow Olivier’s orders while inside a tank, on an open battlefield covered in snow and ash against the Drachman.

When Buccaneer’s stomach growled, on top of the noise of the machine, Miles nudged him with his elbow, trying to be discreet, since this was more or less a formal environment.

“You just ate,” Miles complained.

Buccaneer made a face.

“You call that food?”

“Not this again. You can’t possibly still be talking shit about this.”

“Is the food getting any better?”

Miles sighed. “No.”

“Then, yes, to answer your very witty question, I still talk shit about it. Because it is shit. Whoever hired that girl to work in the kitchens has very questionable taste in cuisine.”

Miles looked at him, as if saying ‘we both know who’.

“About that…” he tried to look completely enraptured in the moving tank that seemed to be about to come to a stop any second, meaning he had to be quick about this or his head might roll if Olivier heard. “I think there’s something up with her. I think she might be…” Miles kept on, lowering his voice a little more in case someone was eavesdropping. “You know, the writer.”

Buccaneer, too, kept his eyes on the tank as if he was paying attention to nothing else.

“The terrible cook?”
“Yes, that one.”

“Are you saying this disaster of a person—” Olivier opened the hatch and got to the floor, awaited for the engineer and they both remained by the iron beast, talking. “—is the same person that wrote our boss the sexy stuff?”

Miles flinched hugely.

“I definitely did not see… sexy stuff in there.”

Buccaneer smirked out of the corner of his lips.

“You did not look thoroughly enough.” Which was about saying the same as ‘I assure you, there is sexy stuff in there’.

“Thoroughly…” Miles laughed. “I didn’t even know you knew that word.”

“I hate you, Miles.” Buccaneer said. “Now, look like you’re very interested in the metal plates of the tank. She is… coming.”

“No, she’s not…” Miles grumbled.

Buccaneer almost laughed.

“And who’s the perv now? Coming, he says…” Buccaneer chuckles to himself, even while standing straight as a candle stick as his boss comes his way. “Everything alright, General?”

She just glared at him, confirming that indeed it was all alright, and as soon as she was out of earshot, Buccaneer patted Miles’s back.

“I’m proud of you, kid. Finally, you’re catching up with the times.”

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*It’s not real. You’ve just been under a lot of pressure lately, that is absolutely all that’s going on.*

But the fact that she had to convince herself of it was not a good sign. Zinnia worked diligently, because her choices had narrowed down to just enduring in silence. And she did so while knowing that it was working in vain.

Briggs loathed her with all its heart. And she let them hate her. What else could she do? Run back into the snow, disappear?

She’d given it more thought than she would admit to anyone: leaving. She had crossed half a continent before, for less urgent reasons, she could do it again, this time in sore need of shelter. Just for the winter, though. Her pride wouldn’t have to suffer any longer than that. Whatever reaction she would get from her family—her mother—she would only have to stomach for a few months.

Spring wasn’t that far away, was it? Almost two whole seasons away. Practically nothing. A mere stroll.

Then she’d thought about the butchery, about cleaning a house she couldn’t bear to call her own, about Anthony thinking he could appropriate her time again like nothing had happened, about her ghosts inhabiting all the empty space she’d left behind.

Going there would be a cowardly move, and almost as good as admitting defeat. Was she even fighting in anything she couldn’t afford to lose at?
Yes, her brain answered immediately.

Yes, what?

Just... yes.

She probably was involved in more than just one conflict, more than one ‘just yes’. And the main one now consisted of not letting it transpire that she felt dwarfed among all these men with such nitpicky taste in food, that she wanted out but not too far or for too long. She wanted to return to her yellow house, with all of her things and a bed she didn’t have to be on rotation to sleep in.

So, she had gathered all the courage she didn’t think existed anymore, and she had made a choice. A very sensible one that shouldn’t terrify her enough to have her rehearsing all her words inside her head while on the same corridor where the door to where she wanted to go was.

Just... open it, say hi, be nice, and demand what you want.

So simple, so to the point. And she could not move a muscle in that direction. She would rather make a fool out of herself and stutter and blush before she entered that room standing tall and proud and speaking clearly that she no longer desired her current post.

Those were the exact words she’d chosen: I no longer desire my current post.

She flinched when a soldier walked past her. She barely managed a muffled greeting that fell on deaf ears.

Great, Zinnia thought. There goes my self-esteem. If there was any left, that is.

She took a deep breath, reached for the handle, then took three steps back, until her back was against the wall.

One door will stop me? One fucking door? When I’m tolerating the worst of the worst just so I won’t freeze?

She could hear voices inside the room, arguing about something, whatever it was. Maybe she should come back another time, considering this last bit of information. She did not want to come in and ridicule herself. The proper behavior would be to apologize for the interruption and leaving, but who in their right mind would go into that room knowing beforehand there was something not privy to them going on there?

Nobody.

She regained the territory she’d lost in those three steps, and she slammed the handle down, pushing the door open.

Look firm, look like you mean to be here, she reminded herself.

Who would go into that room knowing there was something in there that was none of her business? Zinnia would. Zinnia did.

The argument did not lose intensity once she had. It was like the participants hadn’t even noticed her. She thought to herself that doors should make more noise when they’re opened.

“... how many more times do you need to hear this?” Olivier was saying, red in the face. “No! Should I write it down?”
“All I ask is for something else to do. Each mission leaves for weeks at a time. How long does it take to plan one? Less than that!” Buccaneer replied. “During that time I could be instructed on the proper art of driving.”

At that, Olivier punched the table. She hadn’t found that last bit funny, apparently.

“Buccaneer, if you think you can come here repeatedly, make demands—” There went Zinnia’s strategy, then. “—and threaten to waste my time, then you are very right and there’s nothing I can do about it. But if you so much as dare imagine you will get anything you want out of this, then I advise you to reassess.”

“It’s not fair!” he complained. “Miles, back me up!”

“Miles is … working at the moment,” said Miles, sitting very calmly on his chair, revising numbers.

Buccaneer crossed his arms. He was huge, Zinnia had to shift a little bit to the right to see Miles’s face.

“It’s not fair,” Buccaneer repeated.

“And you’re not six,” Olivier rebuked. “Find a hobby, make friends, find a house for next year. I don’t care.”

“Where’s the usefulness talk now, sir? That is what we do here,” Buccaneer said, a little more serious. “We prove ourselves useful to the task at hand. And I spend more time spreading gossip—”

Miles did laugh a tiny laugh now.

“—than preparing the incursions,” Buccaneer finished. “Therefore, half of my time here on Briggs is time I could spend doing something useful.”

Olivier sighed, and Zinnia saw her chance, she stepped to the right, hands behind her back, and said a meek:

“Um… I’m sorry to interrupt, could I have a word?”

The two men immediately looked at her as if saying she had stepped where she shouldn’t have.

Olivier slowly removed her closed fist from the table, dusted her uniform, and sat down. _Nothing to see here_, she thought.

Then she lifted her eyebrows at her until Zinnia realized that was her shot at talking:

_Aren't these two going to… leave?_

Apparently, no. Miles had the tact to return to his task. Zinnia had gotten to know him a bit more since he’d been assigned to show her around. Quiet, diligent, and didn’t pry—much.

At least he pretended not to, which was a change from over half of the rest of them. Buccaneer, worst of them all. She could see the thirst for gossip in his small black eyes.

“Well?” Olivier urged her on.

“I… I would like to request a change of…”

“Of?”
“Of job.”

The way Olivier was inspecting her, Zinnia would’ve thought she’d asked for the moon on a platter.

“Can that be arranged?” she asked as calmly as she could.

“I suppose so, yes,” Olivier said, weighing her choices. Here she had a man who was angry at her for not agreeing to almost the same thing this other woman was asking her for, and said lady who didn’t know what she had just stepped into. Then, it came to her. “Any preferences?”

The same question from the last time. And this time Zinnia had an answer ready. Not in vain had she been paying attention to the general functioning of the fort.

“I saw your cleaning shifts are quite disorganized,” she said.

Miles made a face, and Zinnia panicked.

_Shit, shit, shit. He’s the one who schedules all of that, I forgot._

“Because of the time you spend on routine patrols,” she finished, trying to make herself sound cool and confident. “So, if you’re looking for someone to take that job full-time, I’m your girl.”

Olivier blushed for absolutely no reason at all. She blinked a couple of times.

“Do you… have any experience?” she asked tentatively. She did not want another onion disaster, this time turned a dust disaster. She did not want a disaster—period.

“Not in such a big dwelling,” Zinnia said. “But I’ll handle myself fine.”

She nodded as well, as Olivier inspected her with slit eyes.

“Oh, then…” Olivier said. “Buccaneer, you’ll take her post at the kitchens in your… free time.”

Buccaneer’s face perfectly conveyed his dismay.

“I… beg your _pardon_?”

“Kitchens. Didn’t you hear me?”

“No, I heard you fine, sir, I just—”

She smiled a sly smile.

“Make yourself _useful_.”

He did not move, although he sure knew a dismissal when he heard one. Miles had to cover his mouth with his hand not to laugh out loud there in front of god and everybody.

“Is that all?” Olivier asked Zinnia.

She gulped.

“Sure is,” she said. “Thank you for your time, General.”

“Likewise,” Olivier said before she could stop herself. When she realized she’d said something that stupid, she opened her eyes dramatically but said nothing.
Zinnia waited a couple of seconds there, not knowing what to do. She had a big bulky man standing in the way, practically oozing hot steam out of his nostrils because of her outtimed request, and Olivier looked... all the more worrying.

This place was eerily weird.

She left right away, almost tripping over her own feet.

She didn’t hear, then, what happened later. And thank heavens for that.

“At this point I think it’s safe to say you just have something against my petitions,” Buccaneer pointed out as soon as the girl was out of earshot.

“Absolutely,” Olivier said, regaining her normal levels of ‘I am boss’. “They are rude, misinformed, and repetitive as hell. And if that’s all, Buccaneer, there’s the door.”

“I’m not even asking for you to change my assigned job,” he pressed on. “I’m asking for you to let me engage in a second one. And yet...” Miles looked down at his papers, not daring to make eye contact with his friend. This was about to burst, and not in a nice way. “This... snot comes along, sweeps in like this is the motherfucking library, and you concede? I don’t recognize you, Olivier.”

Neither do I, she agreed in the privacy of her own mind. But she couldn’t out loud. She never could.

Closeted, even now.

“You’re embarrassing yourself, Julian,” she said calmly.

Miles did look up now. Maybe it was not going to blow up unpleasantly in his face. Buccaneer didn’t look about to say anything... inappropriate. Yet.

“If I may... It is curious that the girl gets some... privileges.”

“Privileges?” she mouthed angrily. Caged like a lion in an open-bar prison. That’s what she was now. A lion between bars. “Name one privilege I have given her.”

Buccaneer didn’t even blink. He just listed them off the top of his head before Miles could even think about the question.

“Shelter for a prolonged amount of time, private room, because she is definitely never spotted sleeping where the men do—” Olivier breathed easy knowing nobody had seen them sharing her room. “—first the job we all begged you to get her far away from, then giving her another one when she asked, and on top of it all you’re nice to her.”

It sounded, to her, like he really felt bad she was supposedly being nice to other people and not him. Was he forgetting all the years when it had been the other way around, when she’d fought tooth and nail to get him to see her as an equal?

“I’m never nice,” she said now.

“Then the rest are all true, boss.”

She stared at him right in the eye. She had to crane her neck up in order to do so, but she did it gladly.

“You want privileges, Buccaneer?”
“Yes!”

“Fine! Get in the fucking tank if you so desire! I won’t stand there and watch you get blown to bits on your first day out against Drachma.”

Buccaneer sought confirmation in Miles’s gaze. “Is that a yes?”

“No, it’s not a yes!” Olivier bellowed. “And if I see you one more time around here with such filth in your mouth instead of words, you’re out, understand? I’ll write a goddamn report if I have to, and you’ll be out before you’re supposed to.”

“You’re definitely not nice, boss.” Buccaneer said after staring at her for some seconds. Then he left, without another word.

Miles waited a few seconds, too, before he casually said:

“You should rest. You haven’t taken a break in hours.”

She sat down—rather, let herself drop on the chair—and growled.

“If you’re going to side with him,” she replied, “do so quietly.”

He seemed to take the hint, returning to his chore in silence. A silence which he broke again in a short while. He felt, after so long, that he wouldn’t really be getting involved in business that wasn’t his own if he spoke his mind to her. In her usual demeanor, Olivier wasn’t as uncompromising.

“He is right, General,” he said. “About everything, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t.” I’ve never asked any of you.

“Even for Buccaneer,” Miles muttered to himself now, “that was a whole lot of ‘right’ to pretend wasn’t there.”
“Are you really preparing for war?” Zinnia asked Miles one day, when she’d gone to the noticeboard to see what her shift was this week. She’d caught him literally picking up the printed copies to nail them in.

“We’re already prepared for it,” Miles answered, laughing a little at the question and the curiosity behind it, or—since things were what they were—more boredom than curiosity. “Now we’re just waiting. We can’t actually engage in it first. We defend, not attack.”

“That’s… weird.” Normally, weren’t both sides allowed to start the war? She needed to get back to reading as soon as possible, so she wouldn’t be made a fool out of herself by other people because she wasn’t caught up yet, that ability belonged only to her so far.

Miles shrugged. Maybe being caught up wasn’t a big deal if the most normal of all of them dudes wasn’t gasping at her naiveté.

“It is what it is. It used to be worse, some time ago. Apparently, Drachma’s just playing with us now.”

Like defending a border could in any way be compared to getting stuck during a game of chess.

“Sounds like Drachma,” Zinnia said, having absolutely no idea what she was even saying. All she knew about them could be summarized in: cold, north, border, Briggs stops them and always will.

“You needn’t worry, though. You won’t be expected to participate in actual war.”

“Yeah, that’s a … relief.”

If she happened to just be walking by when either country engaged in combat, would it really matter if Zinnia had permission to fight on it? Wouldn’t she technically be a target anyway, just because she lived under the same roof as them?

“It should be. This,” he said, “doesn’t happen often, you know? How many times did you think Briggs has welcomed civilians in?”

“I feel compelled to answer ‘never’?”

“And that would be correct.” Miles nodded, approving. “You being here is a first. And you didn’t exactly get off to a good start. Nobody really knows what to think of the… situation.”

She shrugged. He was very much not nailing his schedules to the board because he was talking to her. This was the most amount of attention she had received since she’d arrived.

“There’s not much to think about. I’m here, I’m working to pay for my stay, and I’m not getting in anybody’s way.”

“But you’re a civilian anyway,” Miles pointed out. “You’re a foreigner.”

She raised her eyebrows. Did this mean they thought less of her because she was under their alleged care but wouldn’t fight along their side in the hypothetical case Drachma decided to bomb them?
Like hell she was going to be downgraded to a second-class citizen by dudes who lived in the middle of nowhere and were both terrified of and in love with the person who kept them alive.

“I’ve probably been living north longer than some of your recruits,” she said, crossing her arms for emphasis.

“I don’t mean foreigner geographically,” Miles said, laughing softly at her again. “In a way, you’ve infiltrated our numbers because of an invitation from a superior. But you took a job that’s highly valued, and you performed… poorly, let’s say. That leaves a mark.”

“I fail to see how that’s my fault.”

Miles shrugged again and couldn’t help but agree with her a little.

“That’s how it works around here. Better get used to it.”

Then he finished putting up the new schedules and left her alone.

Was that the most she could hope for? Just… some vague conversation, then the other person taking off. Miles was, by far, the most polite individual in the fort. He answered her occasional—very occasional—questions and didn’t look annoyed when she needed to be shown somewhere or explained something, and he never treated her like vermin, like others might feel slightly tempted to. But he still did so just because it was his literal job, appointed by General Armstrong herself, not because he liked Zinnia. He didn’t have to like her, no one did. Tolerating her was enough.

Nobody had developed any fondness for her, though. She saw other people interacting with each other, spending time together at lunch, or even walking places side by side, sharing chores and moments. Not everybody, and especially not the new recruits who felt just as lost as she did, probably. But the main bulk of population did, and it was a huge bulk, in all the senses of the word.

Their size, their innate need to be loud and mark their territory, their presupposition that she was a pathogen they needed to steer clear off.

They made her wish she was even smaller than she already was, invisible, quiet and obedient so nobody would look at her twice.

Two people did look at her, Miles out of politeness and decency, and Olivier… because that’s what she had always done. Intimidation via eye contact.

Two people, in a fort with hundreds.

Now that she was cleaning, at least, she had no more complains coming her way, and she had attained at last that much desired invisibility. The only people who might have more trouble with her presence were the men she shared shifts with, but nobody truly said a word to her other than curt greetings on their way in or out. Their shifts were shorter, because they had other places to be, so in the end it always just came down to her, a broom or a mop and a silent room.

And it consumed her. Gently, without any hurry in the world, because it had the power to. It lured her into nothingness.

Not much time had to pass before her mind learned to empty itself of all thought and just carry out her tasks mechanically. She sat down at empty tables at lunch and dinner, messing around with food her stomach didn’t feel like eating, and most times she did not even bother to start a conversation with whoever would eventually have no choice but to sit with her. Olivier often did, especially at breakfast, and Zinnia debated between wanting to ask her a stupid question to get the two of them to
talk or just sulk about the fact that now the only times she saw the general were during meals, when nothing much ever happened, and in their room—Olivier’s room—at night when they were too tired to even look at each other, not that Zinnia didn’t look sometimes anyway.

She understood the general had more important things to deal with than her. She was a general, for fuck’s sake, it was expected of her. Zinnia had just sort of been waiting around for that moment when they would be allowed to resume their mutual glaring or their mutual curiosity or just something—anything that wasn’t a job and a bed.

It had never happened, though. And things didn’t look like they were heading in that direction. She would have to look for friends, or the Olivier equivalent (ha!) elsewhere. In the crowds of loud men who didn’t care for her existence? In Miles’s patient but otherwise distant behavior?

Wasn’t loneliness just… easier? Wasn’t she supposed to simply endure, wait the winter out in silence, as her penitence?

For what, you fool? She asked herself. I don’t understand what crime you think you’ve committed.

Running. Running had always been the word tattooed on her forehead. Her identification number, the reason she was here. She’d run and she’d been caught in the nets of a stop sign, and she’d had to be rescued and groomed and given a bed and warm food. For wanting to run and not being able to, she deserved to be caged inside a wall between mountains and snow.

And, eventually, she had to run from cleaning too.

She lost count, as weeks passed, of how many times she’d sheepishly sneaked into Olivier’s office to ask her—to plead—for a new job, a better one, she hoped at the time. And she never had to argue in her favor or beg, Olivier just… slit her eyes at Zinnia for a few moments, and in the end always let her do as she pleased.

Zinnia came to wonder if Olivier did that because she was tired of her, and she just wanted to be left alone and no longer cared about the means to get to her end. Zinnia wondered if letting her wander the corridors and working at whatever bright shiny thing had grabbed her attention was Olivier’s way out of a conversation.

Because of it, anyway, she was allowed to move freely from task to task, from department to department, to the surprise and dislike of the soldiers.

Zinnia first worked with Miles, adding numbers and drawing grids and reviewing his own work after he’d moved on to something else she couldn’t help with. She spent a week or two down at the laundry station. Once, she was sent to the stables and she hated the smell of the horses so much she couldn’t stand it more than just a few days. Her face continued to burn red when she pushed the door to Olivier’s office again, to come with a request—again.

Eventually, one day of all those many days in which blush and new job merged, Zinnia’s routine in asking changed unexpectedly.

“Back again?” Olivier said, the same way she had for a while now—familiarly. This was the same way she would address a stray cat that kept licking at the empty bowl she refilled every morning to keep it hydrated.

She didn’t look at her, though. She had… things to summarize.

“I’m sorry, I just—”
“You’re aware I can’t just let you keep moving around because you’re… bored, right?”

“I have to work. It’s the rule!”

Olivier looked up at her now.

“You have been given work time and time again. It’s not having work that compels you to come here, it’s having work that you find enjoyable. And that’s done. I have nothing else to offer you that’s within your ability.”

“Fine. The horses it is, then?” She would smell like manure and hay forever. It was fine. A fine price to pay for food and a bed/plank of wood.

“Actually, I was thinking of…” Not giving you special treatment anymore, confuse these fuckers with something that can’t be farther from the truth. “… putting you with Buccaneer. You’ve already worked with Miles—”

Miles waved at her without looking up from the book he was reading.

“—and I’m interested in you getting to learn both my adjutants’ trades, just in case.

Miles snorted.

“Are you thinking of giving Buccaneer what he wants?” he asked.

“I’m thinking ahead. He’s working two jobs now. So could you,” She glanced at Zinnia. “Part time, at least, you’ll be with him. There is nothing more important in this fort at the moment than keeping the mountain batches going, keeping track of budgets and making new ones.” Zinnia nodded. “The rest of the time, you’ll be with me.”

Miles choked on his own saliva but said nothing.

Zinnia did:

“Sorry, what?”

“With me.”

“Yes, I heard that part, I wasn’t questioning that, I was just… what do you mean, ‘with you’?”

“You can’t just go around doing what you want.” I can’t keep allowing you to. “I’m going to teach you what everybody else here does aside from their assignments. Then, when you’ve learned the basics, you’ll join the patrols like everybody else.”

So much for not participating in actual warfare, Zinnia thought, remembering what Miles had told her earlier. Of course, though, patrolling wasn’t warring, just… prepping for it. Fucking fantastic. And it involves training. I might as well join the academy.

“Miles is upstairs,” Buccaneer said without looking at her when she showed up to his department, uniform perfectly cleaned and even shiny, ready for a new job. He was sitting quite unseemly on a handrail, a pencil behind his ear, looking at something that Zinnia thought looked like maps.

“I’m not looking for Miles?” she said. It had been a while since she’d needed him to give her a tour.
“I was sent here to help out.”

Buccaneer laughed.

“With what, girl?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Just… to help.”

“I’m not doing anything right now I can’t tackle alone, so…” The ‘shoo’ was implied. Heavily.

“The general thought it might reduce your workload now that you’ve two part-times.”

Buccaneer made a face that perfectly conveyed his disagreement and his vast amount of surprise.

“The… general?” he asked, just to confirm.

“Yeah. The general.”

Buccaneer cleared his throat, clearly lost as to the many different generals that could be making reference to.

“Excuse me for a second.” He got up, punched the papers onto her, and grumbled: “Keep these safe till I’m back. Won’t be long.”

“Oookay.” She said, taking a look of the route maps. So those were all the paths the soldiers took when they were on Mountain Men watch? It didn’t look to her like they were covering the entire border around the mountain range. In fact, it didn’t look as if they were covering enough.

“And don’t pry,” Buccaneer added. “It’s confidential.”

She tsked and when he was gone added: “Not anymore, it’s not.”

She had a hunch that Buccaneer was heading to Olivier’s office to, yet again, demand explanations he was not getting. And she was right. Buccaneer was a transparent man, there where he lay waste to reality with his automail arm and his boisterousness.

Buccaneer climbed the stairs to the office like he actually stood a chance. Olivier laughed at him this time, and not because she actually found his being there funny.

“This is getting ridiculous. Do you have any idea how much, Buccaneer?”

“Why? Just… why?”

“She wanted a change. You need help now that you’re… busy elsewhere.”

“Which is all you, scheming. General, if you do this for a laugh, wonderful. Everybody’s laughing but me right now. And that girl won’t, either, when she sees what working with me does to the body.”

“Don’t fry her with jokes, will you?”

“I’m not. She’s not staying assigned to me.”

“I have nothing to threaten you with now, Captain. And no intention of doing it again unless you literally force me to. But isn’t this getting old now? I assigned her to you, and you will shut that mouth of yours and take her in, teach her what you can.” She sighed dramatically. “After all, I will
need a replacement for you next year.”

He gritted his teeth.

“You expect her to learn my trade in the short time it’ll take her to get tired of it and move on to another one?”

That made Olivier’s ever-showing frown dig into her skin a little more permanently. He was stabbing right where he knew she was weakest, mentioning her lenience towards the girl and her constant job-roaming.

“I expect you to do as a say. Unless you’d like to overthrow me. In which case, bring it on now.” She looked about ready for it, almost hoping for it. Some activity might cheer her up a bit. She’d been doing nothing lately but worry and add numbers and make sure everybody was staying on top of their workloads.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

She sighed again, this time just resigning to the facts.

“I’m making her useful. A Jack of all trades, if you will. She can cook—”

“Oh no, anything but that.”

“Fine,” she conceded. “She knows the cleaning routine, she knows how the machinery operates. She knows the basics of accounting and the way schedules are designed. She would have no trouble keeping the animals safe and the rations well-preserved. And now she will get a glimpse into our Mountain Men and the man behind it. I’m making her be useful. Plain as day.”

Buccaneer frowned, not entirely convinced.

“She could sub for any of you now,” she explained. “And as soon as I’m done training her, she will.”

Buccaneer’s frown deepened. That had cleared his doubts to some extent.

“You’re including her in the patrols?”

She nodded.

“I don’t need another soldier. I just need able hands. And if Central doesn’t provide…”

“Except they do. And she’s a civilian,” he pointed out.

“Maybe so…” she said, looking away, suddenly distracted.

A civilian in a world where none would survive, where none would ever grow out of the dirt into the sunlight. Even if Olivier trained her to perfection, to the mold of a soldier in their first year at the academy, Zinnia would never be like them, she’d never belong, and she could get caught in a spiral of danger nobody would think of protecting her from because every piece of the gears on Briggs had already learned to protect themselves first.

“She won’t follow you. Not like the rest of us. There’s not a reason why she would.”

And he was right about that. Zinnia had no duty to uphold. If she followed, she would be doing it out of something external to loyalty. She would be doing it as a civilian, indeed. But Olivier had no
use for another soldier, especially one without proper training.

“I don’t need her to,” she said.

“Then what do you need from her?”

Olivier didn’t—couldn’t—anwser. Perhaps she still didn’t know herself.

The cycle of change began the only way it could, with Zinnia pressed face-first onto the wooden floor, tense like the day Anthony had called to tell her that her father needed help and was adamant on not asking for it.

Dawn hadn’t broken yet. As soon as it did, she would be expected to rise at once, march down to have breakfast with this one woman who fucked with her brain more than it should be permitted—and in many more different ways, too—and then surround herself with weapons and the like. None of them would be knives, she thought. Only one person in this fort, aside from Buccaneer and his automail, was allowed to carry anything that wasn’t a handgun, and that was Olivier.

Always her. Even in that sense she had to stand out. Couldn’t she just… shave that Rapunzel-like mane of hair, get a few scars, and acquire a gun? Did she have to carry that sword everywhere? Did she, really? Who would she use it against?

Zinnia wondered about this as if she didn’t know already that the thought of walking around unarmed probably hadn’t even occurred to Olivier. If it ever did, she’d consider it self-treason.

*If a horde of Drachman infiltrate Briggs, a sword couldn’t really do much against them,* she thought often. Funnily enough, with time Zinnia had understood that everybody but the general would have possibilities of escaping, because the enemy would come straight for her. She was more notorious on foreign northern lands than she’d become in the whole of Amestris. And Drachma was likely to want her dead.

Zinnia shifted on the floor. She was slowly getting used to watching her as she slept, early in the morning when Zinnia herself wasn’t entirely awake.

She didn’t need to ask around about why Olivier would be wanted dead, rather than dead or alive. If they kept Olivier’s heart beating, she would find a way to make it hellish for her captors. And she would find a way back here to plot her revenge.

It was cost-effective, in the end, to kill her, bring her back as a trophy. It would very much constitute the same victory as marching on Amestris and meeting no resistance. If Olivier fell, the north did too. It would make advancing much easier for Drachma.

No weapon could truly defend Olivier from that, should it ever come to happen… but would it hurt to leave the sword behind in favor of something that allowed to attack from a distance?

Zinnia smiled. Yeah, subtleties weren’t this woman’s strong suit. Her reputation preceded her, even now. Even in hypothetical death.

Dawn broke, catching her in the whirlpool of such thoughts. Then, reality bathed over her. Time to get up, time to embrace the silence and the professionalism of today.

Yet she didn’t. Not yet.
Those final moments, right before letting the day drag you out of bed, are the most precious, the ones you cling to the hardest because letting them go means it really is over.

Her eyes found the closed eyelids of the general. Olivier’s face changed so much when she slept, it was like having a mirror that showed you to the past without ever allowing you to change it. Zinnia was used to the marring frown and the scowls, she was used to the yelling and the obvious displays of authority. Whenever she caught a glimpse of anything that forked away from that path, she couldn’t help but stare in disbelief. In disbelief… only at first. Other emotions would take over, little by little, as she paid attention to the details of Olivier’s seeping silhouette.

Her relaxed eyebrows, limbs akimbo on the mattress, her humanity peeking past everything else for some seconds, and … her hair. Tangled and messy and shining in the morning light.

*She has really nice hair,* Zinnia thought feebly. *Pity she uses it as a shield.*

Was there anything in that woman that wasn’t used as a sort of shield, a way to hide things that didn’t belong in this scenario she’d chosen to live in?

She didn’t have much more time to distract herself from the imminent thought of morning: Olivier moved on her bed, awake at last.

Zinnia closed her eyes at once, pressing them shut. She wasn’t sure she’d been caught staring. But she didn’t want to know either.

She held her breath for some seconds, then dared take a peek out of one semi-open eye.

Why wasn’t Olivier waking her up? Poking her with the end of her foot? She was just… sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at her sleep the same way Zinnia had watched her barely some seconds ago.

Zinnia closed her eyes again.

She heard Olivier sigh, so tiny a sigh it barely echoed off the walls of the room.

“Come on,” her voice said. “It’s morning already. We have work to do.”

*We… Yeah, they did.*

Today was training day.

Breakfast went by as usual. A few greetings here and there, someone being much too loud for the hour, and people coming back from watch or patrol crossing the kitchens quite ready to go to bed that very second.

After, they both took the lifts to almost the top of the wall. It was … warm here, contrary to what Zinnia had thought it would be, being so close to the literal hellfire of the snow against the wind. *The top of the wall… I remember a promise, about taking me all the way up in the winter.*

*Is this winter?* Zinnia thought, stealing an emotional glance at Olivier’s direction. *Or this is still fall to you?*

She had never been here before. Around, yes, cleaning. But never actually through the door. There were no signs in the doors of Fort Briggs to at least warn you of what you might be walking into. All doors looked the same, and every one you opened could lead to a surprise.
“What is this place? Some sort of a gymnasium?”

Olivier looked at her like she’d just said something very stupid.

“This is where we’d train our trainees.” She smirked. “If we had any.”

Zinnia gulped. She was the trainee now, wasn’t she? The sole one for miles and miles, all the way down to North City and their command center there. There should be some more there, soldiers who weren’t so yet but aimed to be.

“So what do you use it for, then?”

Olivier shrugged.

“Practice. Blowing off steam.”

Zinnia nodded to herself. It certainly explained a lot about the demeanor of Briggs men, if they had this place to unleash their hesitation and doubts, aside from actually keeping their bodies in check.

“And now I suppose it’s perfect for you to, uh, militarize me.”

Olivier laughed bitterly at that. She, too, must have found the thought of that abhorrent.

“I don’t have the time for that, I’m afraid. But you’ll learn some things while we’re here.”

Every day, for an hour or so. The old hour they’d spent in the square at Iver, avoiding each other’s eyes the same way they were actively looking to make eye contact. A duplicity more proper of a romance novel than the brief history they’d been part of so far.

“I’m your little project. I’m sure you’d find the time.”

Olivier frowned.

“If you want to join the military, this is not the right place to express that desire.”

Zinnia shook her head. Her bangs moved with it, momentarily shielding her eyes.

“I don’t want to,” Zinnia said, “you don’t have to worry about that. Just show me what to do. I’ll make myself useful.”

“Right,” Olivier said, more to herself than anything else. *That’s what we’re here for, making you useful, yeah...*

First, Zinnia learned names and parts and how to put the two of them together. As she’d anticipated, there was no mention of knives or daggers or anything sharp. Just guns, grenades, nets. Surprisingly, a harpoon.

Olivier laughed when Zinnia pointed it out.

“Oh, we keep those here because there’s nowhere else to, but they’re not used as weapons.”

She told Zinnia about how there was a time they would walk for a couple of days to a little lagoon there was in the heart of the mountain range and come back, their shoulders invisible under bags of freshly captured fish, big enough to feed a man for a week.

Once, she told her, someone had dared the rest to swim in, not just stay at the shore. Olivier had been
the first to dive into the blue waters amidst the fish and algae. She’d been young, she’d been full of energy that needed to go somewhere other than missing old bits of her life, and above all she’d been reckless. Not that she mentioned that to Zinnia.

Zinnia listened, as she familiarized herself with new concepts about guns, and for a moment she imagined that lagoon as a mythical component of a fairy tale story. A mermaid with golden hair and diamond eyes would inhabit the deepest parts of the water, and she would only come out to snitch the harpoons from the hands of the soldiers, luring them in.

Zinnia would have liked to be one of those men. She had no doubts she would not drown, but grow a tail of her own and slit gills at either side of her neck, and breathe sweet water for the rest of her life, playing with the cute little men from the mountain at a game neither could win.

It took her a minute, as Olivier urged her on to try a handgun, to realize where this particular daydream was coming from. She wanted no woman with a scaled tail and a twisted interest in those fishermen, but she did want a woman.

A woman who emerged from the lake water, the little droplets sticking to the surface of her pale skin, leaning her arms on the waves as if they were solid. She had no teal tail to hide in the darkness, but two strong legs that kept her afloat.

“You ever shoot a gun before?” Olivier asked, still frowning.

A woman as human as Zinnia was herself, yet her humanity wasn’t perceptible at a first or even second glance. It needed to be dug out, it needed to be unburied from all the layers of ‘I must’ that coated her, like gold. She shone, too, under the sunlight—like gold.

“Not a big fan of guns, if that answers the question.”

A woman whose voice caught you right in, every note of its music a thread that interwove itself with the following one. Once you’d been surrounded by them, the net fell on top of your head. And you no longer even knew how hard you’d meant to escape it. Now, you didn’t want for anything else but to stay.

“It does,” Olivier said, inspecting her closely. They were standing a few feet apart, Zinnia sitting at a bench, looking at blueprints of weapons. Olivier stood at the weaponry station of the room. “Come here,” she ordered. “You’re about to.”

The second time Zinnia had had to swallow her pride and march to the department were Buccaneer worked had been even harder than the first, because that time Buccaneer had had someone else to direct his frustration at. Now, after he’d returned, tail between his legs, from Olivier’s office, Zinnia was alone against the automail arm and the little black eyes that could perfectly well cut through stone.

He promptly sat down on a huge chair that creaked under the size of him and didn’t acknowledge her after a few minutes of sulking in silence.

“You’re going to like this less than me,” he told her. “I will make a mission of it.”

But he kicked a stool her way, regardless. Olivier might be behaving like a stubborn bull, yet he trusted she had good reasons, deep inside, other than messing with him. The retirement he could accept, because it was law, after all. But this? He didn’t have the slightest clue what to do about this
except follow blindly, do as she said, and hope to understand it one day. He’d probably be in his retirement home already by the time he did, though.

“I’m not as bad at this as I may seem,” Zinnia warned him. She had taken a look at the maps and the lists and the geography of the mountain range, and her heart had fluttered happily. Finding ways among mountain peaks and rivers and lakes would be a piece of cake. She could almost hear her dad; she could call him or write to him, and he would laugh even in words when he contacted her back.

“You’re a city girl,” Buccaneer commented. “All you’ve ever needed to do before was follow the streets and they would always take you somewhere familiar. This—” He chuckled loudly. “—is no city.”

She dragged the stool closer to the table. Even then, she had to lean forward a little to reach it.

“Show me the current routes you’re taking, and where you’re spotting the Drachma patrols,” she cut him off, wanting to get her hands a little dirty instead of putting up with his mockery.

They called her ‘city girl’. None of them knew she had never lived in an agglomeration of people big enough to be called that.

“Oh, yeah. Wait.” He stood up loudly, stomped—loudly—all the way to a shelf and picked up a few old parchments that he brought to the table. She could tell these weren’t the ones he worked on, they were informative, clean prints. “So, these are the three main routes we’re taking. We send men randomly on one of them, then change it or not the next time.”

Zinnia peeped at the lines. The range spread miles and miles at either side of Briggs. Technically, the upper portion of North Area belonged to the range, although only the very last tip of it was referred to as such. That was where the tallest mountains could be found. Among them, a small valley had opened. In spring, a river crossed it, and near it the village of Iver had been built. Fort Briggs stood a few miles north of there, at what could have been the very heart of the valley if Drachma didn’t stand quite close to that end of it.

In the map Buccaneer was showing her, only one of the routes remained on pure Amestrian soil, slithering up and down the mountains around the fort like patrols did but in a much bigger scale. The other two ventured into the no man’s land that was the Drachma-Amestris border, one forking left and the other right.

It seemed clear to Zinnia that there remained an incredibly vast area in the middle that the soldiers didn’t get to inspect.

“Are all three ever covered at once?” she asked. It made sense to have two branching routes only if both were traversed at the same time.

“…no,” Buccaneer admitted in a small voice she couldn’t believe belonged to him. He cleared his throat and tried to compose himself. “Two, at most.”

“You could… very well be letting spies in all the time and you wouldn’t know.”

The girl was speaking truth, yet obvious truth. If Drachma meant to be stealthy about it, they very well could succeed in breaching the more distant points of the border that Briggs couldn’t cover in their most ambitious dreams.

“Yeah… we used to think so too, but we have men out there all the time.” Buccaneer raised and raised his voice back to his usual levels as he became more confident in what he was saying. “These
are no small incursions. They do sweep the area well enough.”

“No, seriously,” Zinnia insisted. “This is a major problem.”

Her eyes opened wide at the implications of it. The country could already be housing potentially dangerous population. Iver could very well be a nest of Drachman spies, a place where they could observe Briggs soldiers at their most relaxed. But then she took a deep breath and remembered Candie and Charlie and Lynna and Southy and the rest of the people whose names she had forgotten. Those people wouldn’t hurt a fly, let alone work for a country that had been threatening them with violence for generations. Some people in that town must even remember the last war against Drachma and the poor quality of life after it.

“We caught one spy time ago,” Buccaneer added. “We had a bit of a… situation there. We think Drachma’s stepped back a little since.” He could never forget the face of the general as she’d shoved her message for the enemy into the dead spy’s mouth. He still had nightmares about such brutality from time to time.

“We catch you have spies infiltrated there?” Zinnia said, taking the map from the flat surface of the table into her own hands to look at it more closely. If they sent spies, they would have to have a designated way to do it, too. And there was nothing in here that suggested that. It could always be confidential, like many things here were. But there was just so much blank space between the routes it hurt Zinnia’s eyes.

“…no,” Buccaneer replied, voice ridiculously small once more, as if he couldn’t admit to a city girl that her expectations of this place had been abysmally high.

“And you’re the tactical prowess of the Amestrian military?” She couldn’t help a tiny snort. These are the men everyone is so scared of? They haven’t been defeated by Drachma yet, not because they’re extraordinary but because Drachma hasn’t made a move, she realized, shaking her head. Well, perhaps calling them unextraordinary was a bit of a leap. This place was nothing but impressive, and it continued to be to her after so long of being here already.

Buccaneer just stared at her, trying not to let his mouth fall open. He’d thought this girl would cower continuously in his presence, like most did. He’d had this idea that she’d be as useless here as she’d been everywhere else. And while she certainly had no training to draw from and not an ounce of experience in the kind of job Briggs did, this kid had balls to call him out on the routes and the lack of.

And hurt as it did, he couldn’t just tell her the reason why there was no spy program. He could very well wave his arm at her and grin like a toddler, but it would probably only scare her, and if she came down running and crying to Olivier, it’d be Buccaneer who would get in trouble. It wasn’t worth it. But right now he did want to tell Zinnia that they didn’t do it because Olivier didn’t want them to.

Ultimately, she called the shots around here. And she’d made it crystal clear that she wanted no more lives endangered if there was no need for it. Besides, they were the embodiment of defense in the Amestrian military. Defense, not attack. A defender didn’t need to carefully study the enemy’s moves in order to find an opening to strike. They waited for others to hit first, then retaliated. And it worked. It had always worked, ever since Briggs had had its name.

Why would they name this fort after the mountain range where it stood if not because the men in it had never failed to defend it? And by that logic, soon enough it would be called Fort Armstrong for the same reasons. Buccaneer hoped he would live to see that day, he would never let Olivier live it down.
Now, he just shrugged in reply to the girl.

“The orders are clear: defend the border, don’t trespass it and don’t start a war.” He pulled a smirk almost as wide as his entire face and rubbed his automail arm with his other hand. “Nothing there about not fighting back if they start it.”

Zinnia, though, was still thinking about the lines on the map and how she would fill the space if this was up to her.

“You keep the wall and its immediate surroundings secure with the perimeter patrols and the watches atop of it, right?” she said. Buccaneer nodded. “Alright, then… Perhaps there’s been no new activity because you haven’t been in the right routes to see it.”

Buccaneer frowned at her pensive face.

“Are you suggesting to draw new routes? Hell, we barely have about enough men here to pull off what we’re already working on. New routes aren’t viable.”

She sighed and put the map back where she’d picked it up, then she shrugged.

“You’d at least have the element of surprise, and you’d cover more ground, too. You could connect it to already-existing routes, have the men regroup, too.” Buccaneer was looking at her wide-eyed, so she continued a little more, letting the ideas out as they came. “Even cut short the trips home, take a shortcut. That way you’d send batches more often, the men would be more refreshed, and in case of a skirmish you have thrice the man power out there to fight.”

Buccaneer thought about it. It made sense, in case they had problems at the border again. A shortcut common to all routes meant all different batches would have it easier to regroup, yes, and even send a messenger in an emergency.

He rubbed at the back of his neck with his metal arm. It made clinking noises when he moved it slowly.

“I…uh… I’m going to need to think about this,” he said. “Can’t do anything without approval, though. But I’ll make sure to put it forward, and of course forget about getting any credit for it. And then again…” He seemed to be doing as she had, just thinking out loud. “We still would need more men to put it into practice.” He gave a short sigh, leaning his elbow on the table, and looked at her. “Uh, thanks, though. Your feedback is appreciated.”

She nodded in return, as if to mean it’d been no problem and she expected no retribution for it. She wasn’t military, she knew the basics of how this place worked, little else. She was content with her shared bed, a warm place to stay in, and a few meals a day.

“I’m moving on to budgets now, if you—uh—wanna take a look too, there’s not a lot else to do around here till the batches return.”

And so they worked on that. And on those hypothetical new routes. And on ways to pack lighter for the expeditions. And on how to teach Zinnia the proper abbreviators and lingo and the headers of the documents.

With time, Buccaneer found himself no longer looking at Zinnia the way he had at first. It was evident to him in many ways how she was a civilian and had no interest in changing that. She was so small sometimes he forgot she was there and she spoke far more than he was used to as they worked, but the girl had a head firmly set between her shoulders—if a little imaginative a times, too—and there certainly was something inside that head that could be put to use in his department.
After a few weeks, he would have tipped his hat to Olivier if he’d worn one. *Well played, boss.*

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who are curious, I debated for days whether or not to include the word 'gymnasium' in this. It just got me thinking, since it's from Greek origin, whether I even *should* use words like these in a world where we have no idea if there is even a version Greece. But, oh well... the show must go on, and this was just a word in a work with thousands.

For the longest time, too, I had this self-indulgent headcanon that Drachma was modeled after our Greece (rather than Russia) because of its name and I spent a long time just listening to Greek music and doing a bit of research on the culture, but in the end it was too far-fetched an idea to actually include XD

also, see those teeny tiny mermaid references? keep them in mind, they're going to gain relevance very soon ^^
On that first day at the gymnasium, Zinnia had taken a step forward towards Olivier, whose arm remained in the air offering her a weapon to take.

“It doesn’t actually shoot bullets unless you pull the trigger,” Olivier had said, obviously amused at Zinnia’s reticence.

“Don’t wanna do that now.”

“Yes, you do. I can’t have you out there without knowing how to.”

“It’s not like I will need to, anyway. If something happens, I’ll just run.”

Olivier had then proceeded to take the girl’s hand and press the gun into it, in apparent carelessness molded her hand to the crevices of the weapon, then squeezing it so Zinnia would understand just how tight she needed to hold it.

“If something happens,” she’d replied, “it’ll be your job to stand your ground just like everybody else.”

“Just… how badly do you need the manpower?”

Olivier had crossed her arms. “Badly enough.” *Badly enough to make me wish this was just about manpower.*

Shutting everybody else was more important. Shutting herself up was more important.

Zinnia had just stood there, in front of the target, trying not to immediately let go of the cold surface of the gun. It weighed against the strength of her arm. She was used to much lighter attack weapons, if any at all. The kind that she could work with in the distance after years of aiming at flour bags or up close, stealthy and quick. She had needed those skills time ago to survive alone in the barren lands this place had turned into.

“Alright,” Olivier had said. “Stand as you normally would, arms extended.”

Zinnia had done as she’d been told. Olivier had been right behind her, inspecting her stance as if the whole point of this was just to hang here somewhere and look at her until she dissolved from erosion. But she couldn’t deny there was something… else. A feeling that had had little to do with the session.

Olivier had studied the angles, the overall position. There was no doubt at all to her that Zinnia had never touched a weapon, and that she didn’t exactly feel content and peaceful when confronted with the fact that she would now have to.

She could get in trouble for this. The military doctrine was passed down the official way, Zinnia had a thousand recruitment places she could go to if she wanted to further any training. Yet here they were, a woman and a soldier—a civilian and a general—, in the same room for a forbidden purpose that would really benefit none of them.
Olivier had leaned closer to her. She’d hesitated for a brief moment before she cupped Zinnia’s elbows to correct her posture and the angle of forearm and shoulder.

“Put your left hand under your right,” Olivier had said, then. Her voice hadn’t echoed right in Zinnia’s ears on account that Olivier was far too tall for that, but that made it even worse, because it echoed around her, like someone had inserted it right into her brain as a second entity this body of hers would host.

Am I the soldier, Zinnia had wondered, or am I the woman?

Slowly, Olivier’s hands had receded all the way to Zinnia’s shoulders, which made them tense up so abruptly they both would’ve thought a bullet had been propelled out of the gun, alright.

She had tightened her grip over them slightly. For the moment, they would focus on this.

“Relax them,” Olivier had said. And Zinnia had. On command, like one of those dolls that squealed if you squeezed them in the right places. She could feel the general behind her—right behind her—hovering over her, towering over her in all that blue. Zinnia had been wearing the same shade of blue for a long time now, yet it was never her blue or Briggs soldiers’ blue. That blue had a name and a reputation. “Now,” she had continued, “you can either stand like that or move a foot up until you’re comfortable in your own weight.”

“Is anyone ever?” Zinnia had muttered to herself.

“Ever what?”

“Comfortable in their own weight.”

“Eventually, when it’s time to use it against someone else,” Olivier had replied at once. Her hands had moved to Zinnia’s hips, as professionally as she could. They didn’t linger and they didn’t try to cover more ground than they could. But Olivier’s throat had grown drier in a second. “Lean forward, now.”

Zinnia had licked her lips.

“How much is less?”

“I don’t know. Just do it.”

She had moved back to her original position.

“Like this?”

Olivier had almost laughed. “No.”

“Then how?” Zinnia had asked, trying to sound calm because she hadn’t been ready to appear as a terrified deer that day.
Olivier, though, had had a horse’s heart beating in her chest, galloping away into lands where her head had no control over it whatsoever.

“You need to stand so that the recoil won’t kick you off balance.” Then, she had shaken her head. Locks of blonde hair brushed against the back of Zinnia’s neck. “This is trial and error. Assume position.”

Zinnia had. And this time Olivier had laughed, without thinking too much about how hypocritical that made her.

“I suppose it’s wrong again?”

“So wrong…”

“Alright. I can take that.”

“Would it be alright if I…” Olivier had begun saying. In her mind, this scene was happening so very differently: she was the voice of reason, logic, and coolness, the catalyst of how this would turn out, and Zinnia needed her to be a rock, so she would be a rock. From the outside of Olivier Armstrong’s mind, though, all that transpired was the visual representation of a held-in breath and the brief span of time of inner debate before one chose to exhale at last. There existed no reason or logic or coolness, just two women and a target. “… if I guided you?”

Zinnia’s eyes had opened wide.

“G-guide me?”

“Yes.”

Zinnia had thought about it. It sounded… like a bigger deal than it would probably be. Olivier would just pretty much give her detailed and mostly incomprehensible directions until Zinnia’s body was a perfect shooting stance, and however long that took it couldn’t be any worse than what Zinnia’s brain was playing on a loop for her to cower at.

“Allow me, then,” Olivier had almost muttered. Zinnia’s entire neck prickled with goosebumps. And the infection spread all the way to her clavicles, her arms, her stomach. It all had begun to shiver out of her control.

Then, to prove her wrong—to prove how standing here today was nothing but admitting defeat to herself—, Olivier’s hands moved on her to move her.

Zinnia had made no sound, not because she wasn’t dying to, but because she couldn’t.

These hands weren’t hands she knew. Other hands, she’d learned to anticipate how they would move on her, what they would ask of her, what they would freely give her. These hands and the motion they carried were slow—desperately slow—and tentative regarding their trajectory, although firm on their purpose there.

It felt magical how a body could be molded sometimes by exterior forces who didn’t know it.

At last, after attaining what they’d done this for, Olivier’s hands had moved away.

“Aim and shoot,” she’d said, her voice strangely distant. What Zinnia hadn’t been able to tap into was that Olivier’s heart had ceased to be a horse’s in this moment, now it was a hummingbird’s, all speed.
Following orders, Zinnia had aimed and shot.

Once upon a time, a general and a civilian had consorted. The general had been quiet, afraid her words would let it slip that she felt more woman than weapon, and the civilian had let the scant words the general had said become the sole reason of her existence. Because when a general orders, you follow. And you follow because you believe.

That first bullet had barely grazed the target, but Olivier had smiled nonetheless.

Every day after training, she joined Buccaneer many stories down. Work wasn’t exactly abundant, but when she came back again he had at least considered her ideas, and didn’t exactly dismiss them, although it became clear to Zinnia how he still had received no approval to put them to practice.

Her arms hurt from holding the gun, as she’d been doing for some sessions now. She still hadn’t managed to hit the target exactly where she wanted to, but at least she no longer had trouble standing and more or less could adopt the right posture without needing Olivier to… teach her—show her—how to stand again.

“How hypothetically speaking, if we were to draw a new route,” Buccaneer said that morning when Zinnia walked in, hair slightly ruffled after showering. She always came out of the gymnasium especially shaky and with her sweat glands teasing her, and therefore never hesitated about taking a quick shower before work. “Where would you draw it?”

She moved her stool closer to his, elbows both on the table, and picked the pencil that Buccaneer wasn’t currently using. The general chaos he was used to working in was… amusing, to some extent. He knew where things were and didn’t think twice before reaching into the mess and getting what he’d been looking for. But she still had trouble understanding the logic behind it all. At least the shelf was better organized.

She focused on the map, the same one he had gotten out the last time for her to commentate on.

“Alright, then…”

How much territory wasn’t Briggs covering? How much could they, with this new idea? She bopped the pencil on the surface of the map. So much of this was unexplored. So much of this could be Drachma’s training ground. Not that she had much experience with fending off an entire country, but it made sense to ensure they were being kept from the border, or from crossing it, at least.

Then, finally, she drew a slapdash triangle between the other three routes.

Buccaneer hummed but didn’t say anything yet. Did he expect her to explain first?

She cleared her throat and explained anyway.

“As previously discussed, meeting points with other routes: check.” She drew a line separating the triangle in two twin smaller triangles, then each of those into other two. “Quick retreat route: check. Covered ground? Vastly more.” She shaded the little triangles, her trace slightly less intense now. “Eventually, you would also have eyes on these regions, and you’d control one half of the total territory you’re… fighting over.”

“Defendin’,” Buccaneer corrected her. “Total territory we’re defending, city girl.”
“It’s risky,” she said, ignoring him, “and you would probably need a lot of manpower. But if you ever do come by the numbers, trying it out won’t hurt.” Zinnia sighed, leaning her chin onto her hand. “One day you could go with more routes, cover the entire border.”

“It’s not a bad dream, no.” Buccaneer sighed. He probably did want to do this. If only because, owing to the shortage of men to put it practice, he would be needed out there and he’d see the ghosts of war again. The ghosts that for now roamed lonely in the snow, awaiting his return. “Not plausible right now, but not bad either. Show me more alternatives.”

“Ones we can actually develop or ones to dream about?”

“Practical ones.” He laughed, and she had the impression that deep down he was laughing at more than just her or this idea. “I can’t come to the general with a triangle that’s half as wide as the border.”

Zinnia sighed and got back to work. He wanted practical, huh?

“You could keep drawing lines upwards to make a sort of wheel. No detours, a respectable amount away from other routes, in case you needed help or anything.” She shrugged. “Or horizontal lines. Turn it into a net of sorts.”

“Yeah, kid, the problem is, which? And exactly from where to where it goes?” he said, finding her innocence endearing. She had come in here, thinking herself close to the heart of the fort, but she’d only uncovered the most superficialpars of it. The truth of Briggs was still hers to someday be acquainted with. “It’s not just drawing lines on a map. If you want this to move forward, we need to actually give her something solid.”

To no one’s surprise, Zinnia didn’t need that ‘her’ broken down into something more specific. There were only two women in this fort, they slept in the same room, and she was one of them.

A few feet apart, but definitely in the same room, she reminded herself.

She shrugged again, pushing the map away, and smiled. “I’m not the one in charge. That’s not really up to me, is it?”

Buccaneer blushed.

“No, but since you’re here, let’s pretend we’re both in charge.”

She laughed at him this time. “I thought this was no place for a city girl?”

“Act like you’re not and we’ll get along,” he grumbled, but he finished it off with a smile and Zinnia breathed easy.

She knew this man had been—was—against her staying in the fort, working their same hours at jobs she sucked at. It was a relief that he hadn’t immediately shunned her in his own work place. It was a relief he didn’t seem to remember all that hate he’d been spreading not that long ago. And yet, still, something wasn’t quite right. She had no idea what it could have been.

In her mind, she was still a sailor crossing a lagoon to find a mermaid, but the mermaid never stopped hiding and the only times she showed herself it was briefly, a hand breaching the surface of the water over which Zinnia’s boat floated.

In her mind, the rest of the uniformed men at the shore called her names for having boarded that boat and for carrying no fishing rod. And she hadn’t because she didn’t want a meal, she wanted a home.
A home in the heart of a mermaid. A home that hid behind layers of lies, a home in the truth. A home that bore no name yet had a soul.

Once upon a time, Zinnia would write later, when Buccaneer went to get the both of them a cup of coffee that she probably wouldn’t drink anyway, a mermaid swam and waited under the only waters in the kingdom that still held life. The winter froze other lakes and rivers, but never this one, and so men all over the region walked and rode to the little lagoon amongst mountains, seeking to fill their stomachs and satchels with its fish. The mermaid lured them in, so they would never come to her sacred home anew and steal her only company; their bones became her bed, their empty skulls her loneliness. Yet the men never looked to capture or incapacitate her. They let her roam the waters they fished in, hoping to maybe fish her out one day, too, and that she would grow legs and lungs and could walk among them. A new mouth to feed, yet a mouth who would be able to share with them the intricacies of catching fish.

Once upon a time, I walked and rode because I, too, was hungry. I, too, saw this mermaid. And her beauty and mystery eclipsed my hunger, so I bared my feet and bared my soul and walked into the little lagoon, for I wanted that mermaid’s voice to show me the way, to either do me in after making me wait to see her or give me what I needed in order to not go hungry anymore. Her acceptance would be my home, if she ever chose to offer it. And the men would cheer, the men would lay a rock by the shore with my name written on it. «Here lies the heart of Zinnia Erwin, here she found her home—here, we gave her a home.»

Zinnia wrinkled the piece of paper with her words on it after writing that last word. She needed to start living with both feet on the ground.

Planks of wood as her ground, golden hair as her morning sun.

Once Zinnia had been able to shoot a gun without either freaking out or hitting herself in the face with her own elbows and/or falling to the floor, they’d moved to shooting at targets for a while, and then a new skill was at hand.

One that Zinnia wasn’t entirely new to.

She’d lived for twenty-four years in a town that, very much like Iver, sustained itself on gossip and little else. What was she supposed to do in her free time except listen to her dad and learn new things?

When she’d been in her early teens, she’d been surrounded by knifes most of her life already and her father had made sure she knew how to fear them and use them in equal measure, just in case. Amestris was at war with many, if not all, of their neighboring countries, and the Central Area was the same distance away from any of them. He had signed her up for a class the soldiers had been giving on personal defense, to complement that which she already knew. At least that would ensure his little girl had more choices than just trying to run away and being captured anyway. Theirs were trying times.

So Zinnia had learned then the basics of fighting, and for the first time she’d been introduced to the discipline of exercise and the benefits it brought. Her routine wasn’t intense or special, but it kept her in shape.

And now, although she’d been more or less discarding it for months, all that knowledge in the back of her head kicked in when Olivier brought her in that day with the promise of hand-to-hand combat.
One look at the general’s arms and Zinnia had known Olivier was no newbie to this. They absolutely had to cover that in the academy. Take the weapons away from a soldier and the base of their survival lies on their own fists. And Olivier and her men were all about survival, and not everybody’s, precisely. *Survival of the fittest for the real men of the north.*

“We’re starting with foundation here, too,” Olivier said.

“No need. I have a little bit of experience.”

Olivier quirked an eyebrow up.

“How much is ‘a little bit’?” She very much doubted this girl had been thoroughly trained in anything, but… she could also be downplaying her own aptitudes. God knew Olivier would have, in order to win an upcoming fight.

Zinnia actually smiled.

“Enough for us to skip the basics and for you to whoop me back into shape.”

“Is that so?” Olivier said, tempted to return that smile. So she had ‘experience’… *Enough* experience. Olivier had graduated early, she had fought men who at the time thought their being bigger than her meant they’d already won, and she’d carried their country to sign an armistice with an army at her back that back then would have fought her for her title. Whatever Zinnia considered ‘enough experience’, Olivier didn’t share that opinion. “Well, then…”

And then Olivier assumed her position at once.

“Just one thing,” Zinnia said, lifting one finger and very much already sweating nervously. “Is it even possible to fight wearing this?”

‘This’ meaning the blue uniform and its rigidity.

“Take it off if you want to,” Olivier said. The amount of shame that coursed through her spine right that second could not be measured. *Quick, rectify at once.* Zinnia was looking at her just as puzzled. “Take the jacket off, if you want. I’ll fight like this.”

“So it is possible.”

Olivier took one deep breath that she let out slowly, so Zinnia couldn’t notice how necessary it had been to take it.

“Out there,” Olivier said, “no one will be courteous with you, and nobody will stop wielding a sword at you because you can’t fight in whatever clothes you’re wearing.”

She had a point, yet all Zinnia could picture in her mind was Olivier herself raising a sword at her in slow motion. Zinnia wouldn’t be able to stop that blow from coming, regardless of what clothes she had on her.

Now, though, she smirked a little bit, undoing the buttons of her jacket to reveal a black undershirt that she’d have no trouble working out in.

“Is this you being courteous with me, General?”

To her surprise—and to her own, to be honest—, Olivier smirked back.

“Courteous isn’t the same as polite.”
“Yet both would get me killed in a battlefield.”

“And here, too,” Olivier said, before her smirk turned into a grimace of pure concentration as she moved with enviable speed to knock Zinnia off her feet in record time.

The thud of her back against the cold concrete hurt Olivier’s ears—and heart—but she just smoothed the fabric of her own uniform and looked down at Zinnia, who was lying on the floor as if she’d never been thrown off her feet like this before. And she had many times, years ago, in order learn how to stand and how to move her feet without screwing up her balance.

“I take it back,” Zinnia breathed. “I don’t have any experience. Shit…”

Olivier offered her a hand to help her up again.

“That would have hurt you much more if you didn’t.” Zinnia wrapped her fingers around Olivier’s hand. “Nice stance you got there.”

That means… Zinnia thought as she stood up, that she’s much stronger than she looks.

And Olivier, living up to the last part of her surname, did look respectably strong already.

They locked eyes as they moved their hands away. A soldier and a civilian, the soldier trying to give the civilian an insight—a mere glimpse—into her world in order to keep her safe, the civilian being ready to learn and lose and get swept off the ground if that meant she could look the soldier in the eyes when it mattered and see the truth in her for herself.

If her eyes held the secrets to this war she’s playing at, Zinnia thought, would she be wasting her time fighting me?

What she didn’t know was that Olivier Armstrong’s eyes had seen nothing but war since she had been born into this world, and that she planned to never see anything but.

If her eyes showed me the way out of here, Olivier wondered, would I take it?

“Again,” she told Zinnia. “Try to anticipate to me this time.”

In a way, hadn’t Olivier already taken that route long ago, letting the girl in here and making sure she wouldn’t be a target out in the field?

If her eyes could give me answers, they both thought to themselves, feet firmly planted on the concrete, would I dare ask the questions that plague me?

Zinnia’s back hit the ground many times that morning. Each time it did was a shot she’d missed another morning, each time was a thought she hadn’t voiced. But she took each and every one gladly. She lasted longer, too, before Olivier’s full power hit her in the chest and sent her flying—not just literally.

Her back hit the ground, yes, but it was Olivier’s hand that brought her back up, her voice that invited her to try again, to try because one of these times she might stop her in time.

When Zinnia did, her black undershirt wet from sweat, none of them had expected her. They almost fell to the floor when Zinnia’s forearm had stopped Olivier’s attack in time, because Zinnia immediately tried to take a step back and get away. In doing so, she tripped over her own feet.

Olivier wasted no time in wrapping her hand around Zinnia’s forearm and tug so the girl wouldn’t
fall. Her own hair was plastered around her temples from the day’s exertion, but she held on tightly.

“Thanks,” Zinnia meeked out.

“It’s not fun if you fall on your own.”

“Isn’t it?” Zinnia laughed.

Olivier immediately moved to make this ‘fun’, as quickly as impassively as the first time, and the result was the same.

“Hey…” Zinnia complained from the floor, again. “That wasn’t an invitation.”

Olivier laughed too, “I know.”

But she reached out again so Zinnia would stand back up and they could leave already, since in their enthusiasm it had become later than usual. Buccaneer would already be waiting for his new assistant.

Confidently now, Zinnia held the hand, but she didn’t take it. She grabbed Olivier by the wrist and brought her to the concrete floor with her.

Olivier looked as if it had started to rain purple.

Zinnia, on the contrary, began to giggle.

“I can’t believe you fell for that.”

Olivier had hair in her mouth, so she pushed it away and then tried to regain both her composure and her cool-mindedness. What in the hell did just happen? She didn’t get to her feet yet, though; the flower girl wasn’t.


You’ve… caught me by surprise, not a lot of people can do that. And even if they can, I always outsmart them long before they can act. And yet... you’ve defeated me as a joke.

Olivier sighed. And as more than just a joke.

“Are we going to stay down here for the rest of the day?” she asked.

“It’s not so bad down here.”

“That’s not you talking, that’s the part of you that’s grown used to sleeping on wood.”

Zinnia began laughing. Without any thought on appearing normal and not idiotic. She sounded like a teenager, and she loved it.

Olivier couldn’t believe her ears. Laughter… and not as response to Buccaneer’s loudness or as a defense mechanism. Real laughter. In her fort? In her gymnasium? Because of something she’d said?

This could almost be a… an inside joke of sorts. If anyone else were hearing right now, they wouldn’t even understand one bit of what was happening.

Her heart picked up on the cues and began distributing a pulsing harmonic feeling all over her body, bright like the sun in the sky that filtered through the clouds.
“Still,” Zinnia said once her belly hurt from chuckling, rolling onto her side to look at Olivier in the eye, “it’s nice right now.”

Olivier found herself returning this eye contact, born out of something so simple yet almost exquisite in this place. Normally, if she stared into someone’s eyes it was to prove she would always be the last to look away and to remind them of the fact that she was above them, hierarchically anyway.

The flower girl, she discovered, had brown eyes. Brown and big and expressive, always hopeful even if they housed the tiniest bit of despair in them. What hurt you, Olivier wondered, and how do I make sure nothing does again? Eyes like those needed to be free from despair, they didn’t deserve anything but the warmest of glees.

She looked into Zinnia’s eyes for seconds that almost turned into minutes, and she nodded.

“It is nice,” she said.

“But we can’t stay here all day, no,” Zinnia said. “We have places to be.”

And how strange that in this very moment Olivier would have forgotten about all those places she was needed to instead just lie on her back in the floor of the training room with a girl she barely knew that had laughed at one of her jokes.

She broke eye contact first to stand up, and then Zinnia followed. Olivier didn’t help her now.

“One more round?” Zinnia said.

“I thought you’d said we had places to be…”

Olivier inspected the look on Zinnia’s face. This wasn’t a scene out of one of her daydreams while signing contracts, this was… in front of her right now. Three-dimensional and very real. The look of a woman who was more than ready to learn and lose and get swept off the ground if that meant she could look Olivier in the eyes just a little longer.

And the truth of that overwhelmed her. Her heart didn’t know now if it was time or not to get sickly saccharine or wait until later.

This one more round Zinnia was hinting at had nothing to do with the physical training of it. It had to do with whom she’d be training with.

Then, reality poured all over Olivier when she blinked. A dream, that was all it was, all it had ever been. Back in the town’s square, back in her office, back here. Nothing but an illusion her over-exhausted brain had clung to in order to stay awake, in order to fall asleep…

But she did laugh at my joke, and those eyes… they can’t lie, not even to me.

She shook her head to drive any thought away. Any confusion she might hone over this would only make things worse. Her heart, of course, chose now to flutter excitedly. It, too, liked the idea of a joke that has an audience, and the idea of there being something behind that than just plain old sense of humor.

“I’ve some matters waiting to be tended to,” Olivier said calmly, “I’ll see you here in the morning. Try not to get your ass kicked so easily then.”

She walked away with a smirk still on her lips.
She laughed at your joke and she wanted one more round, Olivier thought as her legs took her closer to the door. Whatever that means, it means something. Unless she’s a spy. Which … she couldn’t possibly be. Any Drachman with half a mind that had been allowed this close to me would have already beheaded me in my sleep. And this woman isn’t even capable of hitting me back in combat.

Olivier grinned. Nobody could see how her lips curved, but they did, and she would remember it. That was all that mattered. She grinned and she took off her jacket in one clean motion, on her way to the showers, before she pushed the door open and got out of there.

Zinnia didn’t fix her eyes anywhere but the general’s back as she’d exited the room. Was she imagining things or had there been… something different in them today? Something less sharp and more welcoming? Something like familiarity, perhaps? Like acknowledging.

All thought she was capable of when she saw Olivier removing her blue jacket to reveal the same undershirt Zinnia wore—plus those two arms that made her surname acquire a more literal meaning and the fluidity in the muscles of her back—was: if tomorrow is anything like right now, I would let you kick my ass to infinity and beyond.

“No whistling in the workplace,” Buccaneer said for the fifteenth time this morning. For some reason he didn’t quite get to grasp, Zinnia was not complaining about anything today, or making snappy remarks, or even… being bothersome in her petite girly way that made him roll his eyes every quarter of an hour.

“Was I?”

“Yes, you were. Quit it.”

“You tap your arm against the table…” she added in a small voice.

“Yeah, well, I’m boss around here.”

She smiled stupidly.

“Is captain under general?”

Buccaneer blushed. “Shut up and get that list done.”

She was supposed to think of new things the soldiers might need on their next trip past the border, and she’d been reading old complaints from previous incursions in order to solve some of them, at least. Buccaneer was content with her work so far, but the little happy noises were beginning to slowly grate his brain.

Despite the hour, and despite the early training he knew she had before coming here, Zinnia remained chirpy today when normally she’d be frowning already and drinking all the coffee he brought her while she called it names.

He’d never met someone who directly attacked the coffee like this, and he’d been drinking it with old Central soldiers for decades. Eventually, the tongue got used to the taste. And even if the coffee was bad, it still did its job at keeping you awake.

He observed her for a couple of seconds. There really was no trace of that Zinnia today. He would have liked to know what the hell had happened to her to keep her this happy and if he could maybe
get hold of it for himself. Monday mornings made him wish they were physical entities just so he could fist fight with them.

“Zinnia,” he said, rolling his eyes. “You’re humming.”

“Sorry,” she said, not looking up from the paper. “I don’t notice it when I’m doing it.”

“Well, then maybe I will hum so you see how bothersome it is.”

He did, true to his word. But his humming felt more like an instrument that’s played at full intensity while not being tuned.

She began guffawing.

“Buccaneer, I swear to god, I will ask to change jobs again!” she said, covering her ears, but she looked just as joyful, as if his terrible singing didn’t affect her.

She could’ve stood in front of the armies of hell today and not flinched at the horrendous sights before her.

He stopped, though. He knew his singing cold very well be hellish too.

“Now you see what it’s like, huh?”

She just grinned at him like he’d seen babies do when he’d been just Julian and not quite Captain Buccaneer. Babies smiled with their whole face, and you didn’t have to doubt their intentions, you just instantly felt their love for you when they did. He stared at Zinnia’s grin, trying to remember the last time he’d seen a baby. Trans men at Briggs were not an exception and there had been established couples in the fort for years, yet Buccaneer had a bit of an idea as to why none had chosen to have an infant or to adopt one. Drachma, mostly. Drachma and the work itself. It would be crazy to raise a child in this environment. Although, he thought, perhaps it might cheer up the place. He for one would love a baby to play with.

“What on earth is wrong with you this morning?” he told her. “You’re everywhere but here, kid.”

She didn’t stop smiling, but she did shake her head a little, trying to get back to the ground from her little cloud. A cloud of the memory of those hands on her body, that hand touching her own, and those eyes. Blue, the warmest of blues, even beneath all that ice.

“Oh, you know... nothing much.”

“Yeah, right, take it somewhere else, then,” Buccaneer grumbled.

They worked in relative silence for a while after that. She kept making excited little noises from time to time, as if she were trying to repress laughter, but he knew by now that whatever thing she found cute wasn’t around here but in her thick head. So he just shook his head when he heard her go, and tried to focus on the work. Ever since he was at the kitchens for the other half of the day, he found it harder to concentrate on this. Plus, he smelled like food all day long, it made him hungry.

“Well,” he said in the end, “I think this is decent enough.”

“Hm?”

“The new route.”

Zinnia stared at him.
“I’m taking it up to Olivier to get it approved.”

Zinnia made another one of her noises and blushed.

“Well, she approve of it?” she asked, though, as if nothing was happening. And if Buccaneer was to trust her word, nothing was.

“That’s what I’m gonna find out, kid,” he told her, and stood up, picking his map and her list and rolling them up to carry under his left arm.

She pushed her stool away from the table and got on her feet as well.

“Where’d you think you’re going?”

“To… the general’s office?”

Buccaneer chuckled loudly.

“And why do you think I’d let you come with me?”

“Because—”

“No ‘because’. If I let you tag along, you’ll ruin it. Stay here. I’ll be back in a while.”

She sat back down on her stool, trying to look wounded at his negative.

“And if I hear you humming when I’m back, I swear I will…”

She didn’t get to hear the rest of it, though. Buccaneer was out of the door as fast as he could. They’d worked on this project long enough, and this time he’d had another brain on it, not just his. Olivier couldn’t just shut it down saying it was all Buccaneer’s way of getting back at the universe for his arm or whatever else he’d lost in the last war. This time, he thought, she’d have to listen.

And she… did. Olivier listened, took a few notes, even took a look at his and Zinnia’s designs, as well as the budget list and the improvement on previous trips. She didn’t attack him once. Once!

Buccaneer pretended not to notice and just let his natural charisma carry him through the brief minute he spent defending his idea. But it was evident, nonetheless, that Olivier wasn’t herself this morning. and Buccaneer was familiar with that, because he’d just left a daydreaming girl that shared that trait with her.

You have got to be kidding me, he thought. She chooses today of all days to be lenient, huh? I wonder why.

But he couldn’t speak against it. So far, it looked like this strange and shared mood of his boss might get her to give the new route the green light. Her entire face had been… stretched up, like a smile but a permanent one. Even her eyes seemed lively.

In the end, she archived the files Buccaneer had brought, thanked him for his time, and concluded that even though they certainly couldn’t afford to open a new route right now, she would be looking into it because she thought it necessary.

Julian Buccaneer left Olivier’s office, spirits high, and tried to high-five with his automail arm every single newbie he ran into, booming with laughter.

Today just had to be a good day. It must have dawned that way. Nothing else could explain Olivier,
of all people, being normal for one morning.

Or so he thought, up until he opened the door back to his little cave in the heart of the fort, and found Zinnia scribbling on his table, giving off the same soft vibes as before that maybe he would allow to affect him as well now.

“What’d she say?” Zinnia asked, never taking her eyes from whatever words she was writing.

Buccaneer remembered Miles telling him he’d suspected this might be the author of Olivier’s mysterious paragraphs, but the calligraphies were distinctly different. Those paragraphs were carefully written, this was Zinnia’s typical levels of chaotic when taking notes.

“She… said she’d think about it,” he answered.

“Fuck…” Zinnia said, all too happy to be cursing.

“It’s actually good, coming from her,” he said, leaning forward to pick one of his lost pencils.

Then he saw it.

The paragraph.

Detailed, carefully written.

And, most importantly, it contained the one word that confirmed it all when Buccaneer wouldn’t have dreamed of seeing it confirmed: Olivier.

He kept on reading, squinting a little so he wouldn’t miss a word of it, all while pretending to be paying no attention to Zinnia. Olivier was everywhere in that paragraph and scratched out lines.

Buccaneer felt a great surge of pride out of nowhere, the same one he had the day Olivier Armstrong had been appointed Major General.

I fucking have to tell Miles, he thought, the son of a bitch was right.

Chapter End Notes

From next week on, I'm going to stop posting Adversity and instead I'll be uploading the Mermaid AU I wrote months ago in celebration of reaching 100k words, and that way I can keep on piling up chapters of Adversity, because I'm a little behind lately and I want to pick up the pace again >///<
The calm before the storm

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The length of a day was measured not in hours but in thoughts. Trapped inside the fort, Zinnia’s senses had little material to distract herself with. Her body, sore from all those mornings practicing, acted as an independent being, taking her to the room she was expected to be in without her paying the process of walking any mind.

She was lost elsewhere, in the continuous loop of memories and words. She hadn’t dreamed that encounter in the gymnasium, and she couldn’t keep lying to herself about this. For a moment—a brief but filling moment—the world had spun on its axis to give Zinnia the gift of feeling she wasn’t out of place. She had literally been on her back against the concrete, a failure of hand-to-hand combat even when she shouldn’t technically be, and yet she hadn’t wanted to leave.

Leaving was Zinnia’s thing, her cup of tea, the wind that propelled her forward. Time ago, at the bakery at Iver, all she’d dreamed of was for sundown so she could leave work and change into something comfortable. She had ended up nervously abandoning every place she’d hoped to one day call a home. And yet during that training session her instincts had glued her to the floor, fixing her eyes on Olivier’s.

And she had had nothing to analyze in that shared glance.

The truth had been laid out for her. For the both of them.

Zinnia had had a… feeling, when they’d both stood up again and composed themselves, that Olivier didn’t want to leave either.

And yet they’d both gone their own ways, to work, to take the entire day to think this through—think of the right words to say to the other at night.

And when night had fallen, Zinnia’s corrosively happy mood that Buccaneer had hated so deflated like a cloud after rain, vaporizing itself into nonexistence.

Olivier had closed herself up again, sitting on her bed as if nothing had happened.

To make matters worse, the next morning caught Zinnia unprepared and beamed its new light onto her wet cheeks. Rain fell from the skies, for now in the form of drizzle, but she could see the gray of the clouds threatening the valley in the distance. Inexorable, they would make their way here and bring hell down on all of their heads.

It made the walls smell like fresh paint, although nothing here was new. And instead of that distracting Zinnia, it infuriated her.

She was back to the kitchens, part time at least. Buccaneer always left to help the cooks, after his department and plants for the routes had become a distant reality of the past. Usually, Zinnia would be given leave to do as she pleased around the fort if he didn’t need her, but lately she’d decided against roaming without a heading, and she’d joined him there as well.

There was something about his rough character and his crude sense of humor that made her feel… protected against rougher things. His jokes and stories wore her down at times, but it was better than to wear herself down, which would have ended up happening anyway.
If she thought about her morning routine, trying and failing to, for once, just land a hit on Olivier, Zinnia lost her will to do anything else. So she didn’t. She let Buccaneer take her mind off of that with work and that route that hadn’t been approved of yet. She let the fumes of the kitchen reach her in the distance, since he hadn’t let her come close to actual food and had told her to do dishes. She let the time-warped rhythm of the patrol Olivier had eventually let her join force her brain to focus, and she slowly felt the devastating effects of all that combined exhaust her.

Any distraction would have been welcome at this point.

When she’d told Buccaneer in passing, a pile of dirty casseroles and trays left to wash, he’d laughed at her.

“She mostly just trains you for the ego boost. Feels good to knock someone down,” he’d said. “If you want to beat her up so hard, you need to start working out on your own. She’s never really gonna teach you anything useful if all she does is win at sparring.”

There were already thunders in the horizon of the audible spectrum, but nothing was as loud as Buccaneer’s voice, not even Briggs’ heavy machinery.

She’d just nodded to him, in silence.

The next morning she’d waken up before the sun, her face an image of what she was living, and headed upstairs, story after story, to train on her own.

She’d caressed the few weapons in here she recognized and sighed when she’d remembered her knives. Would they be buried in the cold by now? She wasn’t too sure now that she wouldn’t be needing them.

She couldn’t train with anything like that here, she’d never be allowed to take it with her on patrols. But she didn’t want to shoot at targets anymore. Once she’d figured out how the guns worked and gotten familiar with it, hitting the mark had become as easy as doing it with pointy knives at home.

Zinnia had made a fist.

She wasn’t here to master anything, she just wanted to be good enough to not get thrown to the floor every time.

Olivier had tumbled over her time and time again, morning after morning, her face impassible, her motions clean and perfect. They hadn’t had a proper conversation since the day of the joke, and it didn’t look like that would be repeating itself anytime soon. Olivier just fought, taught, and left.

*I would let you kick my ass to infinity and beyond, yes,* Zinnia thought now, getting rid of her jacket. She had recovered some of her old clothes, but they were mostly either spring dresses or rudimentary coats she’d stolen from Iver’s shops. Besides, wearing the uniform made her blend in. *But that doesn’t mean I won’t be kicking yours any time soon too.*

The promise of ‘soon’ was what kept her going through the days. Waking up this early marked her face and posed difficulties in staying up anymore, yet she continued to do it. Eventually, she built a bit of strength, even over the last time she’d felt at her peak. It still failed to be enough to beat Olivier Armstrong—a name that did her justice, Zinnia had found.

All her life, she’d heard tales about the wealthy families of Amestris. The Armstrongs went back generations, yet the only Armstrong Zinnia had had a first name for as a teen had been Olivier.

*The Northern Wall of Briggs. The Ice Queen.* And variations of insults that Zinnia didn’t even think
she could reproduce anywhere. As if the existence of a woman general immediately disrupted everything Amestris had been built on.

Olivier had both become a target and an icon.

To Zinnia, though, she had another name now. One that nobody had heard, and one that made her as much justice as her own family name:

*The Mountain at the Border.*

When Zinnia fought her during training, it wasn’t a woman she was sparring with, not even a major general. When Zinnia stood before her, muscles tense and ready, she was hoping to defeat a mountain.

Every time Zinnia got close to quitting, the sun barely a line in the horizon, she forced herself to think about the kind of body and will required to best a mountain in combat.

*I have to keep going,* she told herself as the sweat drenched her. *Soon… very soon.*

Soon, all of this would make sense, somehow. Soon, she would win a fight, and Olivier would look at her the same way she had that day when they’d both allowed themselves to fall, thinking that there would be a net at the bottom to catch them when they did. Soon, something would happen that would restore that ‘almost’ that had never truly bloomed into anything but silence and duty.

Yet days passed and that was nowhere near. She only had glimpses of hope to cling on to. She could only keep living, keep lying to herself.

*Have I ever done anything else?*

Well, that one time… she hadn’t needed to lie to herself. The universe had done it for her. She was still waiting for that version of reality to continue.

One particularly windy morning, cold like the heart of the killers of Ishval, Zinnia woke up alone in the room.

Brushing her eyelids, purplish now after waking up so early for so long, she got dressed between shivers and headed up. Today she took the elevator, the previous night had made her too tired for stairs. On the weekends, there was no training with the general. They both had things to do outside of that, and it made for an excellent excuse to sleep in, which neither really did. Even if Zinnia rose early on her days off as well, she typically didn’t train and just devoted her time to reading old writings of hers, or even trying to make new ones to come life, to no avail.

This morning she had every intention of not following that and just punching something until this… desperation and spiral of feelings heavy as lead faded a little.

*This is what happens to me when I dare to hope… I only meet the void. And it might be nice to stare into its eyes, they’re just not the eyes I want to look at. They will never be.*

She pushed the handle down and kicked the door open, gently, with one of those yawns she would never dare to display in public.

A few steps in, she shut her mouth so abruptly she almost bit her lips.

Olivier was very much awake, and very much *almost* naked from the waist up, and also very much beating the shit out of a punching bag.
Zinnia didn’t even notice she had stopped walking and was literally standing right by the door, eyes open wide and unable to look away because she hadn’t been caught staring yet and she doubted she was going to.

*Beating the shit out of it feels... like a lesser description of what’s actually happening,* Zinnia thought. It was more apocalyptic than just brutal. She had never seen anything quite like this. If she’d thought she had been privy to Olivier’s full unabridged strength, Zinnia was now taking all of those thoughts back.

Olivier wasn’t a mountain right now, she was just energy. Energy an old god had angered, energy that took the shape of a human woman so that it may be channeled appropriately and destroy everyone at its proper time and place, not just in a final flame of destruction.

If Olivier’s hands had touched Zinnia now, as they normally did while training, Zinnia’s bones in her arm would have fractured.

For some reason, Olivier had taken off her undershirt and was fighting in loosely wrapped bandages and her uniform pants, and Zinnia felt positive that if any divinity ever dared set foot on Amestris, they would do so in Olivier Armstrong’s body. A body like hers was fit to be modeled in a statue for eternity to contemplate as eons passed, a copy of the weapon that had massacred the enemy and rendered lovers senseless.

Zinnia dug her nails on the back of her hands. *Which am I? The one that dies in her splendor? Or the one that kneels before her?*

Olivier still hadn’t noticed her presence. She was so absorbed in the imaginary fight she was leading, it would have been impossible for her to. She moved, faster than light, and every time her punch met the bag, the air was sucked out of some poor bastard’s planet in the universe. Her hair, too, seemed to know how to stay back, floating behind her, crashing against her back and shoulders which were shining in the gray light of the morning. Zinnia had never understood how she could wear it down and still beat her in seconds, with those blonde locks always getting in the way.

Eventually, Olivier was panting so hard, her muscles spasming often enough, that she had to stop.

And that’s when Zinnia’s heart beat excitedly, remembering the other day, remembering the hope she still held dear, and remembering that, unfortunately, she was very much standing there by the door like an idiot who very clearly had been ogling.

“Hey,” she greeted meekly.

Olivier locked eyes with her across the room, setting a hand on the punching back to stop it from swaying.

*She’s a god and I’m a grain of sand. She will crush me in her grasp. She will end me. I should be quiet and bow. But can I?*

Zinnia talked, unable to shut up: “How come you’re here this early?”

This was it, she could feel it. This was part II of that moment she had interrupted out of necessity to analyze it alone. They would share a glance again, hold hands somehow, and find answers in each other’s presence like they never did late at night, in the same room but miles and miles away from there.

This was how the universe patted her adorably in the head, leaned down and smiled at her, telling her that she’d been stupid for doubting its intentions and its signs, all carefully strewn over the past
couple of days because they were meant to lead them here.

Zinnia began moving, walking—almost bouncing off the floor—towards Olivier, aching for a spar or just a chat. Maybe even both. Both could make the bags under her eyes disappear.

But Olivier just stared at her, and Zinnia could swear she’d glimpsed something there in the general’s eyes—something akin to hope.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she said in the end, disinterested, picked up her jacket and left before Zinnia’s heart could drop to her feet, mumbling in confusion: So... this really wasn’t... it?

I’m afraid… she thought to herself, in answer to herself, there is no it. I’m afraid… my lies took over me.

She walked to the punching bag, still slightly moving back and forth, and stilled it with her own hand, then sighed.

There was only one man in the showers when she came in and thankfully he was already walking out.

“Morning, General,” he said.

She didn’t say anything, not even bothering to consider he might think now he’d done something to cross her. Nothing had crossed her, nothing in particular. It was, quite simply, just everything.

Today, just everything.

Her knuckles hurt from her punching session earlier, yet she still dug them onto the slippery walls once she was alone.

“Did you really think she saw anything in you?” she spoke out loud, to herself. Always to herself. You fool, you depraved soul.... Haven’t you learned anything?

Olivier was thirty-five years old, she had been alone for the last fifteen, and now it was too late for her to even try again. She didn’t want to try again. She had just thought, briefly and stupidly—weak for the first time in literal decades—, that this time would be different, that now was the perfect moment. That she’d seen something in the flower girl that wasn’t really there, after all.

She let the shower run a little before she walked in. The water sprinkled her like drizzle, then slowly soaked her to the bone, her hair waves of molten gold. She gritted her teeth to keep herself from shedding one single tear.

“How could you let it happen?” she wondered aloud, her voice being swallowed by the water.

She had waited patiently, heart beating fast, every muscle of her body longing to move towards her goal, and then... nothing. A greeting and a nod and a smile. The usual.

And today the girl came here when she had no reason to, just to flaunt how little she cared, when Olivier couldn’t even focus anymore. She was a teenager once again, surrounded by things she wanted and could never even hope to have. She was alone and she was foolish for daring to hope anyway.

All because she ached. Deep in her stomach, in her belly, in her heart. The hidden parts of her pulsed
with need, with want, with fear. Fifteen years and she had brought this feeling home with her again, she had let it sleep next to her, curl on her floors or on her bed. She had let it reach her bones, she had let it feed on her food and grow in the same place where Olivier herself had once grown into a woman of the military.

And for a second, even less than a second, all she’d repressed and pretended didn’t even exist had lain there, on the floor, right in front of her, and Olivier had let herself fall to meet it. She had fallen and she had been ready to never get back up again, because she wouldn’t be alone anymore.

But her dreams had cracked, made of feeble glass and little else. They had broken into tiny little pieces like the dreams of a teenager. Pointless, naïve, and only ever just dreams.

This time Olivier didn’t punch the wall. She let it hold her upright as she hugged herself. She leaned on the corner of the shower and she didn’t cry.

Survival of the fittest, she repeated over and over again, like a mantra in her head. Only the strong survive. Only the strong. You’ve only ever been strong, don’t stop now. Don’t you dare stop now…

Deep in her stomach, in her belly, in her heart.

The image of a sleeping girl, curled on the wooden floor. What did she dream of? Where did her brain escape to while Olivier clung desperately to staying awake?

The image of a bubbly girl that fought back when poked. A girl who sold words instead of goods. A girl who smiled at her as if she knew her, as if she knew her history and didn’t think of judging her for it, as if she saw in her more than just a general. A girl who had touched Olivier on scant occasions, and yet… Whose touch I crave.

She lowered a hand down over her stomach, her bellybutton, her hip line, between her legs. And she pressed her forehead on the wall and let the water take her away to a dream in which she wouldn’t need to crave, for she would experience instead.

The day didn’t exactly get any better. None of this ever could.

She kept remembering echoes of the past, screaming at her that this was just repetition, what she deserved for not being there for Dew all those years ago. The universe was making her pay for it.

Another severed dream. Another pain she had to repress until it disappeared. Since when did silence have the power to hurt her so? Hadn’t she lived like this, among barely even proper sparks of words, for the entire year? Hadn’t she been ready to just accept it as her life? Why did it feel like punishment now, when nothing had changed?

Because nothing has changed, Zinnia thought. And she’d been biting her nails, hoping eventually it would. Somewhere in her mind she told herself that hoping was for the weak, and she wasn’t. Not anymore. One did have to be strong to survive here.

Survival of the fittest. And in her case, survival of the stubborn.

Today, stubbornness was her only fuel. Stubbornness and refusal to give up. Letting the cold and the upcoming storm take her whole seemed like a good plan only from the inside of the fort.

As soon as she stepped out, ever faithful to Miles’s upkeep on the schedules and performing her duty
as a fellow patroller, all ridiculous thoughts she may have entertained about running off in the distance and probably dying tragically in a blizzard turned to complaints muttered feebly as she joined her companion for the shift.

“Cold, eh?” he told her.

She immediately smiled to herself. It was absolutely forbidden, if you’d been living here long enough, to say a word against the cold. You had to like it, after a while, as if it were a pet of the fort that eventually everyone warmed up to. This man had to be one of the newbies.

“Fucking freezing,” she said.

She remembered him, now. He was the boy who had been nice to her on her first day, and who probably had spread shit about her cooking skills like everyone else, yet who now was being perfectly nice again. She could use ‘perfectly nice’ right now, after such a day.

“You’re the new girl, aren’t you?” he asked after a while of stomping on the snow to keep warm on the spot.

She laughed. “When was the last time there was any other girl in this place?”

“Fifteen years? That’s when the captain says General Armstrong came here.”

The captain being Buccaneer and his loud mouth. He must tell stories to the youngsters, she thought. Which clarified why she’d never listened to any outside of work. Once she left his company, she was invisible.

*Even more so now…*

Zinnia had to make an effort to remind herself he had no idea what had happened between her and the general—or rather, what hadn’t happened—and so she couldn’t be rude to him because he was just being nice.

“Then I guess that makes me the ‘new girl’, no matter how long I’ve been here.”

“You don’t really get rid of that reputation for a long while, though,” he warned her. “I’m still new, too. And technically it’s been… I would say, forever.” Austin laughed. “Long enough.”

“Did you choose to come here? Or were you one of those recruits that are just needed?”

Austin blushed. “I would say I’m… the result of very clever threats that you don’t believe will be acted on until they are.”

“Oh. That’s…” Zinnia knew Briggs didn’t exactly have the best of reputations among military destinations, but for it to be so bad superiors used it as punishment...

Austin just smiled and shrugged.

“It’s not that bad, I’ve grown to like it here. I thought it would be much worse, the first few days.”

“Yeah, you and me both,” she muttered.

“Anyway, I’m here because I have to be, and I’m glad it’s more of a home than the hell I was promised. But you’re not here forever, you could choose to go back anytime.”

“I’m pretty sure my house is covered in snow right this second.” She smiled. “And my family is…
half a world away.”

Which was actually true.

“Still, you have no reason to be getting used to any of this. It’s… curious, that you are, regardless.” Zinnia sighed. “Might as well make a home out of this place,” she said it out of habit, even when she’d always stayed for different reasons than ‘might as well’. Something had lit up in her brain. Austin was right. She could leave. She didn’t have to stay. Not after… well, everything. She’d never been meant to, anyway. No one wanted her here, not even herself. She’d wanted something else, something that nobody could really give her, in the end.

“Might as well, yeah,” he said, but didn’t add anything else, perhaps waiting for her to. She didn’t.

After the silence that followed that conversation, Miles came to replace Austin’s double shift, and she started thinking about leaving. It started to take shape in her mind, as more than just a nation to entertain late at night when the quiet and the creaking of the pipes ate her alive.

Where could she go, realistically? Nowhere, not really. The farthest she could get in this weather was North City, and even then… it would be too cold over there to risk having to sleep rough if she didn’t find accommodation.

“Miles?” she asked. He hadn’t seemed to her as wanting to talk, he normally preferred to work in silence unless there were some things to be discussed, but she thought she might as well just give it a try.

“Yeah,” he said, turning amiably to look her in the eye.

“Can I ask you something?”

He smiled. “I thought I’d been appointed to be your eyes and ears in this place.”

Indeed, he had, and Zinnia couldn’t bear to look back at that moment now. So much had changed, but never in what was important to her. *What’s a job and a bed when… I’m as empty inside as the day I came?* It didn’t occur to her that her reaction had a name, and that her feelings weren’t objective anymore.

“Yeah, well, I don’t need eyes and ears all that often, now.”

He nodded. “I’ve noticed. Regardless, what do you need?”

*Here it goes, for all it’s worth…*

“Do you know where people go, when they leave Iver in the winter?”

He seemed shocked at the question, like he’d expected something much, much more different to come out of her mouth. Perhaps he’d expected her to know the answer by now.

“North City,” he said. “Almost everyone around has a winter residence there. Why?”

That would explain Candie having most of her business over there.

“No reason,” Zinnia lied, her voice slightly high-pitched. The last thing she needed was to have him tell everyone why she was sorting out her priorities to take off and never come back. She could even pretend all of this had just been a nightmare.
I was swallowed by the color blue on my first day up north, now all I ask is that it may spit me out and let me forget why I approached it in the first place, she would write if she had tools to now.

“They should’ve told you, you know?” Miles said, misinterpreting her general reaction, thinking it meant she was punishing herself for not having found out sooner about the migrations. “If you’ve never lived north before, you had no way to figure it out on your own.”

“No, it’s okay, I just… the concept feels pretty unrealistic to me. Not everyone can afford a second place.”

“That’s very true,” he agreed. “But, remember, this is the north. Almost everyone knows someone. Eventually, they find a house.” He sighed. “In the end, it’s just for a few months. When March comes, so will all of them.”

She thanked him. But, really, sorry to break it to you, Miles, I’m not all that worried about my neighbors coming back but about me taking off.

Zinnia finished her shift and went back inside, shivering. A late night wind had brewed up the past couple of hours, and the fort had already turned on some of the warm yellow lights. She walked straight through the coffee room; no head perked up to say hi to her, nor did she stop to greet anyone, although she recognized many of them.

She just wanted to get the snow off of her uniform and change into something gray and comfortable, then curl up on something horizontal and let the night fix everything that couldn’t be fixed manually.

Even her wooden bed didn’t sound so bad right now, as she stomped her way up to the top of the wall, where the wind creaked louder and there was little to do if one couldn’t fall asleep.

She fished her key out of one of her pockets and opened the door, expecting the room to be empty. Of course, because today was messing with Zinnia’s head day, Olivier was already inside, retired early to her chambers.

“Shit, sorry,” Zinnia said, immediately closing the door at the sight of bare skin. It was just her luck to run into her with one leg out of her night clothes.

Olivier smiled bitterly. “It’s alright,” she said. “Just come on in.”

Zinnia did, and tried to focus on changing out of the wet uniform herself, but she found that task daunting. For… some reason.

Olivier dropped her clothes on the back of the bed as if she didn’t care much how wrinkled they would be in the morning, and lay down on the mattress, back turned to Zinnia to give her some privacy.

Which she deeply appreciated. It wouldn’t really help her situation much to have the general snooping in on her. Normally, she’d step out to let her change in piece, but given that Olivier was already technically in bed, Zinnia felt bad just by thinking of asking her. They shared a room, they should be getting used to this.

Although… they would not have to keep doing it for too long. What did it matter, then, if they were prolonging it all a few more days?

Zinnia, too, got her blankets out as well as her pillow from the drawer, and set it all up on the floor. It was always cold at first, so she lay a blanket down for insulation, and then sat down, covering her lower half with the rest of the blankets.
After that, Olivier slowly turned on the bed. Zinnia had never seen her wake up, face turned at the wall. She always dawned the same way she fell asleep. Or, in case she moved too much, she always dawned looking in Zinnia’s direction.

Her big blue eyes were open now, and Zinnia had no idea whatsoever what went on behind them, what she was thinking. At a first glance, she might’ve even thought Olivier had just fallen asleep without closing her eyes.

“So,” Zinnia said, seeing how neither of them was going to turn off the lights for the night. She might as well just make small talk. “How… how was that, um, shower?”

“What shower?” Olivier asked.

“The one you… took,” Zinnia said. “Earlier this morning.”

Olivier’s face turned red as a sunset when it hid behind gray clouds at the clear memory of what happened earlier that day, of what she’d done in the name of feelings she understood less and less the more she thought about them. The girl couldn’t possibly know about any of this, she wouldn’t be asking this with a straight face. And Olivier needed to control herself so this wouldn’t escalate.

“It was just a shower,” she grumbled, turning her back to Zinnia once again to hide her flush.

Zinnia took the hint, got up to switch off the lights, and tried not to breathe too loudly as she lay awake for a while, thinking how the hell she had let it come this far when the truth was so very obvious.

_She doesn’t want you here_, she reminded herself. No one did. Zinnia would be a fool to exclude Olivier from that list.

Chapter End Notes

I am back!!! And I can't wait to share what’s coming next in the story.

I'm currently on chapter 48 and nearing the third act of the fic btw, so to say that I'm beyond excited is an understatement. I'm so looking forward to posting everything <3
The storm she wished for

Zinnia let some days go by. She had to make absolutely sure, she told herself, that there really would be no chance for her to ever thrive here. In reality, though, she kept her eyes on the corners of every room or corridor she was in, waiting to see if maybe it all hadn’t been an ultimate illusion of hers and there was still a chance at … something in here that didn’t involve rudeness and doubts. If Olivier had made a move, just one and not necessarily towards the dream Zinnia had and refused to pay attention to—at least consciously—, Zinnia would have stopped clinging to the fantasy of leaving.

But Olivier didn’t. And as every new morning dawned, Zinnia’s mind grew more and more attached to the realization that Olivier was never going to. Whatever Zinnia’s reason truly was for having put up with Fort Briggs in all its glory for this long, it was growing thinner by the minute.

She didn’t dislike it as she had in the beginning, she had her routines, but something was lacking in her experience there. She had a hole right in the middle of her chest and it refused to guide her towards its own completion.

One night, she looked down at Olivier’s sleeping silhouette on the floor, clutching at her own chest to keep the hole from acting up, and at the third sigh coming out of her, Zinnia surrendered. At last. After so long of trying to still hold on, to still make it, to still pretend.

She couldn’t pretend if the woman she’d fallen for lived and breathed and ignored her right under her same roof. It was torture, and Zinnia would really rather pick her own ways to torture herself. This wasn’t among her favorite, precisely.

Tomorrow, she told herself. I will ask for transport tomorrow. And then... and then...

And then she would face the elements again. And her family, again. The next day, Zinnia would regress. But at least she’d be safe from the dangers that here alternated between haunting her mind and her reality in equal measure.

The sound woke her merely hours later. Winds and rain and thunder. The storm that had been on its sure way here for some time now. The entire room pulsed with gray light, intense and melancholy and gentle, in a way.

Olivier, too, had been affected by it. In this light, she looked like a ghost, dressed in her gray clothes for the night, and standing at the drawers to get out her uniform for the day. Her hair, too, moved as if underwater.

So strange... Zinnia thought. Any other one of us would look like one of those ugly monsters, but not her. Of course not her.

When she turned around, Zinnia’s eyes were lost in her general direction.

“Sorry I woke you,” Olivier muttered.

“Wasn’t you, don’t worry…”

“The storm?” Olivier asked.

“It’s … loud.”

Olivier smiled, her smile the tiniest bit sad. “Get used to it.” She sighed. “They’re typical this time of
Zinnia said nothing.

“Do you mind if I change here?”

“Don’t mind me…” Zinnia said, she closed her eyes again and turned her back to Olivier. Later, though, she heard the door slam and she breathed out.

*Another day in the nebulous reality of Briggs, Zinnia thought. The last day…*

What should she do, to celebrate? Sneak something out of the kitchen while Buccaneer wasn’t looking? Or maybe just give everyone a bit extra? Would they smile at her as she did, now that the food wasn’t hers? Would that change her mind?

She smiled to herself as she got out of her mat on the floor.

No, she didn’t think she would. It was time for a change. A partial one, at least. There would always be time and room to run free after she found somewhere she could get on train.

A breath of fresh air, some ice cream, a blanket whose scent would transport her places, and she’d be good as new. She would put all of this behind, like she had done with the South Area. First the heat, now the cold. Candie had been right, Zinnia did like her extremes.

Hot and cold…

Those eyes. That was exactly what they were, a whirlpool of both, and you never knew to which of those belonged the wave that was coming at you.

*No! she screamed in her head when she caught herself thinking that. No eyes. No nothing. Just work. Work and then…*

She ran down the stairs, since she was already running late.

“You look like a bear just mauled you from the inside out.”

“Good for the bear…” she mumbled, but Buccaneer heard her anyway.

“Oi, don’t be an asshole.”

Zinnia grumbled in response.

She sat down in her usual spot, going over the last drafted list of essentials they needed for the upcoming weeks. They had already gone through each item a few times, trying to cross some off to adjust to the fort’s general budget, but Buccaneer kept insisting they could just keep them since the general would do what she deemed appropriate at the very last second anyway.

He stared at her because of this. The fact that it remained on the table didn’t amount to it needing more work, and he knew Zinnia knew this.

“You sure you’re okay, kid?”

“Never better,” she said without looking up.

“Come on, don’t lie to good old Buccaneer,” he said, his gossip mode on. He’d smelled it on her like
a hound. “Where has your charm gone?”

“Down the toilet?” she said, still not looking up.

“Hint taken…” he grumbled, leaving her alone at last. But his antennae had already swirled in on themselves, attuned to her. She seemed to him like a petite little cloud of grins and silly noises that sometimes remembered she was human and with value, especially if there were maps involved. This wasn’t typical of her. The short displays of aggressiveness or the like he’d seen in her looked nothing like this.

He felt an insatiable bout of curiosity about finding out exactly what was behind Zinnia’s moodiness. It could only be good and juicy and oh boy the men would love it. They already whispered things, from time to time, around a cup of muddy coffee, but nothing solid, and Miles refused to let him talk about… things… in public. Or in private. He refused to bring it up at all times, no matter how hard Buccaneer teased.

Something good and juicy indeed.

She kept suspiciously silent and grumpy all day long, even when she was finally allowed to leave him to his arduous tasks at the kitchens.

Then, it caught up with her, the fact that if she did this, there would be no way back. This invitation wouldn’t stand any longer. She wouldn’t be welcomed back. She’d be on her own. Besides, she was working from the assumption that they would provide her with transport to North City, at least. That would be one awkward car ride.

Regardless, she had a burning feeling in her stomach, pulsing against any scary thought about leaving. It was decided, it was the right plan. She wasn’t military, she didn’t belong.

*That sounds like the worst excuse ever*, a voice said inside her head.

*Shush!* she said to herself.

If her belly burned intermittently, she had to listen to that.

She couldn’t ignore that, could she?

Even when faced with Olivier’s office and its perennial closed door, Zinnia ignored the parts of her screaming to get her to stay. They screamed louder, but she paid them no mind. They’d had longer than long to actually complain about this decision, now was not a good time.

She knocked and walked in. She had done this very thing often enough to have long since stopped feeling hysteria at the thought. Who cared? She was getting out. She could cut all ties right now, for all she cared. This would all be over soon. She could pretend it had never happened.

Blue. Black on white. Warmth and coldness. The smell of the walls on Briggs. The terrible coffee everyone drank.

*Shush…* Zinnia told herself, more bleakly than before.

That room that stood as a bridge between alternate realities. The last thing Zinnia thought of before she closed her eyes for the night. That awkward feeling in her chest, right in the center of her torso.

It all swirled in her mind, pressuring against the walls of her brain, as she stood in the same spot she kept coming back to. And like every other time before now, Zinnia explained briefly the reason for
her coming here once again, failing to look Olivier in the eye. Time ago she’d found a little trick to pretend she wasn’t falling apart, and it was done by staring at Miles’s table.

“You want to leave?” Olivier said in summary of her own words.

She couldn’t believe this. It was the imperfect ending to the nightmare of the last couple of days. An abrupt, cut-flower ending.

_She… wants… to go now? Why?_

“I wouldn’t want to be in your way.”

“You’re not,” Olivier said, louder than she’d meant to. “You’re contributing, just like anybody else.”

“There’s just something really wrong with the only woman here, other than you, working part-time in the kitchens.”

Olivier blinked in confusion, still trying to pass for regal and composed, but deep down she felt as if she’d jumped from somewhere really high without knowing what there was at the bottom.

Free fall for eternity. What sin had she committed to now be dealing with this?

She stammered the first response she could think of:

“I thought you’d settled well into your new job with Captain Buccaneer.”

“That part is actually not the problem.”

Olivier sighed, understanding that the problem was the usefulness of Zinnia when she worked side by side with Buccaneer in the kitchen, which was actually a job she’d taken without anyone saying anything to her about it.

“… I’m open to putting you up to something else if you’d be more comfortable”

Suddenly, Miles laughed out loud. In one single chuckle were weeks and weeks and repressed bouts of laughter. But he covered it up rather nicely with a few coughs. In what world did Olivier Armstrong bend the rules to accommodate other people? As if she hadn’t already done it time and time again for a long while now. It never stopped being funny.

“It’s not just about that, really,” Zinnia said, trying not to put too much emphasis on it. _It’s about how you seem to abhor me and I don’t know how to fit in anywhere. I need to run. I need to run from my own failure._ “I know it’s a lot to ask, but… is there any way I could borrow, I don’t know, a horse? A car?”

Olivier’s jaw never dropped. It didn’t. It was, quite simply, one of those things that just did not happen. Rain never brought stones as it fell, horses didn’t bite chunks of meat off any prey, and Olivier didn’t let her jaw drop in public.

Especially not because of what was going through her at the moment. If the skies had split open to reveal a secret passage from Drachma’s parliament to the heart of Briggs, she would have hated it less than this.

The flower girl, leaving? Leaving for good, not just for a few hours to work. Leaving the floor and the bed and the kitchens. Leaving everything but her mind. Leaving _her._

As if Zinnia could have any reason why to stay. She’d made it abundantly clear she didn’t want to
belong or mingle or exist in a military compound where Olivier reigned supreme.

*Could that be it?* Olivier thought. *She’s leaving because of me?*

She looked down at her hands, laced together on the table, then back at the window behind her. The thick circular glass was covered in its entirety in rainwater, and more drops kept washing up there as time went by. The wind was not forgiving today. And, by the looks of it, Briggs was so surrounded by clouds it would take a while before this storm dissipated.

What was she to do? She’d followed through with all other of the girl’s requests, if she didn’t do the same with this one, she would be letting on a lot more information than she meant to. Besides, she had no authority to decide what to do beyond the point where Zinnia had been invited to stay. The girl wanted to leave now, Olivier had no jurisdiction in deciding she wouldn’t let her.

The problem was, did she have enough fortitude to let her go just like that?

Picking up on the awkward silence that her hesitance had caused, Olivier shook her head and replied:

“… I’ll arrange for a car to take you there after the blizzard’s dissipated.”

*Funny how they call anything ‘blizzard’,* Zinnia wondered. *How big a blizzard would this have to be for them to call it ‘storm’?*

It was not like she’d expected a negative from the general, but this straight-forwardness and lack of emotion regarding the decision had shocked her indeed. All she’d seen was Olivier, bored enough at her request that she’d taken her sweet time to answer.

“Thank you,” Zinnia said. “It’s… really kind of you.”

*Is it?* she thought, though. *Or is she just this eager to let you go?*

Miles broke his normal composure once again to mouth at her:

“Heart of gold, you just gotta get past a few miles of ice and snow first.”

Zinnia smiled nervously, in no mood right now to reply that she didn’t really think it was a matter of having a good heart.

“Don’t mention it,” Olivier said, oblivious to Miles’s little gesture. And it was, at heart, a measure of who she was talking to, because Olivier didn’t say nice stuff to people in dismissal, she just asked them out of the room.

The girl left as swiftly as she’d come, but things weren’t the same. Now, on top of worrying about the supplies that surely wouldn’t make it to the fort in this weather, Olivier was going to be unable to relax because of this one girl and her wishes.

*Leave… She wants to leave.*

Miles chuckled again, softly.

“What?” she spat.

“Nothing.”

“Say it.”
“Nothing,” he said. “It’ll be… strange to watch her go, won’t it? She’s grown on us all, going from the onion girl to one of us in essentials if not in fact, how curious.”

Olivier rolled her eyes.

“Shut the fuck up, Miles,” she told him, “and do your job.” But she didn’t deny it. She didn’t even dare think of denying it. Because, in a way, it was true.

A civilian had made her way into the best defended military compound in history, and now the people there would feel her absence. Curious… and absurd.
Fear and respect

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It doesn’t matter now. None of it does.

The flower girl was leaving when this storm ran its course. It was indeed a storm, and that was about
the only consolation Olivier could find in the situation, that it would still last long enough. She feared
the day she would get up in the morning and the sky would be clear blue.

She stopped holding back. Why would she? Whatever she did, whatever mistakes she made,
whatever dishonor she brought on herself, the girl would take it all with her. It wasn’t worth it now
to keep acting like someone had died and she was mourning. She only had one thing to mourn, and
she’d already come to terms with the fact that the winter that had reigned supreme inside her for
years was over. The currents of water within her had long ago thawed and over-spilled.

Her self-indulgence didn’t take up the whole duration of a day, because Olivier would not have been
able to live with herself otherwise, so she contented herself with being the embodiment of spring
only in the kitchens, sheltered by the noise and the food.

She made no efforts, now, to try and not spend obvious amounts of time with Zinnia. She made no
efforts, either, to look for a table away from hers. Sometimes, Zinnia wasn’t alone there, sitting next
to Austin or someone else, but Olivier joined them anyway, as if all the other empty spaces didn’t
quite please her.

Like several other times before, they exchanged brief words. Only now Olivier didn’t stop at that.
Why would she?

It doesn’t matter now. She’s leaving anyway. That acted as a blocker for every single thought she
had that tried to convince her to leave.

Maybe part of her was trying to get Zinnia to stay, luring her in like a mermaid does with a sailor.
Maybe she had just tired of playing around.

She realized this on the day she told the story of her trajectory in the military. Not in excruciating
detail, not even in detail per se. But she was telling it to another human being, a civilian, a girl who
would soon leave with all that knowledge intact in her head. One person would know the story of
Olivier Armstrong the officer and that person wouldn’t even care about it.

Except Zinnia cared. Very obviously. Because she listened, without any intent to spread the
information around like fresh gossip. To her, none of it was material for gossip, it was a story nobody
else could tell and no one ever would.

Amestris feared and respected the woman who kept the north safe, but they ignored the existence of
the circumstances that had led her there. All Olivier was for them was an impregnable wall nobody
got near to and survived.

For others, perhaps a tiny group of people in the country, she signified certain change. No woman in
the military had ever made it as far as she had, and Zinnia liked to imagine there were little girls all
over the place who dreamed of one day being as fierce and efficient as General Armstrong.

“It must be nice,” Zinnia said over lunch that day. A bunch of soldiers had already been talking
about it among themselves, and Zinnia’s brain had clung to their questions as if they were her own. She couldn’t go to bed tonight without hearing this story, “to know you’re the first of many.”

“Precisely because I’m the first I don’t think there are many,” Olivier said with a quick snort.

Zinnia was surprised. “Don’t you know any other women in the military?”

“Of course. A few. But most are not allowed to climb up the ranks.”

“So how did you manage it?” Zinnia asked, leaning on her open palm, moving closer without realizing it.

She had not expected to be having this conversation, or a conversation, and she’d be damned if she let this opportunity pass her by. Who are you? Just... who are you? Because Zinnia had traced lines in the sand trying to grasp what lay in the heart of this one woman, and then she’d retraced them on paper, but she must have surely missed so, so much. She wanted to fill in the blanks.

Olivier hesitated. How, indeed, had she done it? Talent? Stubbornness? Defiance? All of the above? Ultimately, the simplest answer couldn’t include any of those words.

“I fought a war and came out unscathed,” she said.

“You… fought in the Drachman Wars?”

Olivier smiled at the innocence visible in the girl’s smile. She hadn’t expected Zinnia to be up to date on military history, much less on something that was spoken of without mentioning many names. She’d been appointed Captain by the end of the conflict’s final truce, when many other male soldiers had ascended much more astronomically. It’d been the way to shut her up, and to ensure she caused no more trouble. Little had they known… you didn’t stop the Northern Wall of Briggs, she stopped you.

“I put an end to the Drachman Wars. The armistice was signed because of my team’s involvement in the negotiations.”

Zinnia leaned back on her seat. “Holy fuck…” She covered her mouth at once. She hadn’t meant to swear in front of Olivier.

Olivier sighed.

“That was a long time ago. War merits would make almost anyone get to my rank.”

“Not everyone has the actual guts to cross a border to talk an entire country into peace,” Zinnia reminded her.

They do, if they’re ordered to, Olivier thought. That’s how it works.

“For the most part, women like I used to be are kept in offices and under the rule of more important men.” She scoffed. “It’s the men that fight our wars. It’s the men that have a chance to really do something for our country.”

She spoke dispassionately but Zinnia could tell it was just a façade. She’d made note of the words ‘women like I used to be’. Nothing good hid behind that. Why the separation between them and herself? What had she become that she no longer felt part of that group?

“Lieutenant Hawkeye, from Eastern Command, for example,” Olivier continued. “She works for the
greatest ass this country has ever given birth to.”

The men around her guffawed and echoed: “Colonel Roy Mustang.”

Zinnia laughed with them, not understanding entirely but finding it funny nonetheless. Inside jokes always made one feel nice. She was lost as to names and personalities in the institution, though. To her, Briggs was all she needed to understand about the military. She’d never heard of this Mustang or his lieutenant, but she did infer that things weren’t exactly peaceful between him and Olivier.

“And she could aspire to so much more,” Olivier spoke again. “Without a patriarchy making that harder than it has to be.”

“It’s… a little sad that all a woman can do to ascend in the Amestris’ military is stop a war.”

Olivier took a sip of her drink. She had nothing to add to that. It was many more things than just sad, but she figured Zinnia had summarized it well enough.

“Did you always want to be soldier?” Zinnia asked what she thought was an innocuous question, but Olivier went pale and refused to look her in the eye.

She’d just wanted out. Wanting to be a soldier per se had come last, when she’d already almost been one. But the flower girl didn’t really care about that. Nobody did. And Olivier had made sure to put it behind her a long time ago. Olivier Armstrong the civilian was now nothing but a faint memory.

“No…” Olivier finally revealed in a grumble.

All that mattered now, more than anything else, was being that soldier. Standing where no one else would, at the edge of the precipice to make sure no one else came close to the abyss. She was good at that. Her heart had chosen this path to stick to forever. She had chosen this family over the one she so intently meant to leave behind as a child.

All Olivier had, in the end, was her men and her fort. Everything else had long ago ceased to matter. Everything but this war needed to stop mattering to her.

She pushed her chair away, picking her tray up as she did.

“Leaving already?” someone asked. Someone who, like Zinnia, had taken an interest in those stories. It wasn’t very often that the general would actually speak to them in this manner, in this setting. The storm had had an impact on people’s mood, after all.

“So should you,” Olivier replied to him. “Wars aren’t won while sitting on your asses, gorging on food.”

There were complicit stares in the little group of soldiers who had come to hear her talk about the good old golden days.

“Wars are won when one’s sat down on one’s ass, gorging on food,” someone laughed.

“Not this one,” Olivier said, finally leaving. She didn’t feel like arguing. She didn’t feel like anything.

Zinnia watched her go, positive now that what had driven her away wasn’t the concept of wasting time during lunch but her question.

Good thing I won’t be around to put up with this… embarrassment much longer, she thought, taking
I never thought much of soldiers. I never thought much, really, about this country. It was just a place to live, a place to roam, and a place to leave one day. I didn’t like the fact that men dressed in blue could control my fate, or the fate of my people. But I’d never really learned what these men do, as a whole, or what the invisible gears of the structure do in all of this. Until I met a gear itself. With a name she had made for herself, fit for the role she played in wars and diplomacy alike. She has killed, and I know this. She has led battalions into the snow and returned with many casualties on her side, men bleeding from their shoulder sockets and men that will have to bury other men. She has stood there for years, whether what rained upon her were harsh critiques or praise she never meant to appropriate. And it is strange, very strange indeed, that the same woman our country both fears and respects is never looked at as that, as … a woman. A woman who wasn’t always a soldier, a woman who didn’t always think of becoming one. Amestris doesn’t know the story of that woman, and she’ll never tell it, but I often dream that my words will be the first to tell it. If she let me. If my words actually mattered.

“Psst, Miles… Take a look at this,” Buccaneer broke the silence, lifting his arm to show it to him. They were locked inside Olivier’s office. Buccaneer had come wait for Miles so they could go grab some snacks together during their break, but instead they’d hobbled around a new piece of paper neatly placed on Olivier’s table. It’d been placed there overnight, blooming from the wood like a seed breaches the surface of the soil it used to hide beneath. “I’m damn right sure this is a new one. She even talks about me.”

Regardless of whether that was true or not, Buccaneer would always see himself reflected wherever there were mentions of shoulder sockets and copious bleeding.

“Give me that,” Miles said, taking it into his hands to inspect it. “Alright, it is new.”

“What is the meaning of this? The kid’s just leaving them around for Olivier to read now?” The last time he’d seen anything handwritten it had been at work, and Zinnia almost always crumbled the remnants of her creativity and put them all away. Buccaneer often followed temptation all the way and salvaged them from being shredded to bits. It was the closest thing to a magazine he had.

“Apparently, she is…” Miles mumbled.

How long had it been since the last one? He couldn’t help but wonder what had sparked the return to this strange little voyeuristic hobby now, of all times. Literally in the heart of a storm.

Buccaneer seemed to be of a mind with him.

“Just like that?”

“I don’t know, I’m not in her head.”

Buccaneer cleared his throat. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

“It’s… different than the usual,” Miles said hesitatingly.

“It’s good. And it means she’s done some research.”

“Or been around to listen to us give out information.”
“Or done research,” Buccaneer insisted. He found it so appealing that this was all coming together this nicely. All those little clues they’d thought about and all they’d talked about in hiding. Zinnia was writing things, or she had in the past to come back to it now, and this confirmed it much more directly than Buccaneer catching her red-handed ever could. This was evidence.

“It would not be that hard to write this without research,” Miles pointed out, looking at the page. “All she’d need is to have heard of the general and… some imagination, which the girl does have.”

“Wait! There’s a couple more.” Like a thirsty man about to dunk his head in a lake, Buccaneer fished them out from under other papers and sniffed at them to ascertain their origin. “Smells new to me.”

Miles blinked slowly, crossing his arms. “You’re disgusting, d’you know that?”

He walked to Buccaneer and tried to get hold of the newest paragraph, but the captain was too tall, and even with Miles standing on tiptoe it would be an impossible mission.

“The general is going to come back at any moment and I swear I will pretend I don’t have anything to do with this…” Miles left the new piece of writing on the table, exactly where Buccaneer had found it, as Buccaneer read the others he’d found.

He chuckled. “Good luck with that."

He then began to read out loud:

I keep thinking to myself this is all I deserve, to stand in this shadow and content myself with a glimpse of the sun and the mountains. I walk and I talk and I become a part of me I didn’t think existed, and it’s all because I was taken in, given a bed and a job and something to desire. What does she desire, the one who made all of this possible? Is she still all about a war she stopped or has she slowly found more things in this military fort than the sole duty it entails to be a soldier?

“This girl has the hots for her,” Buccaneer claimed as if he had been gifted with the whole truth.

Miles sighed, failing to see the allegedly obvious declaration of love in a paragraph that spoke mainly of Zinnia’s curiosity towards the motifs Olivier had to be where she was to this day. He saw something very different.

“She’s bored,” he said. “There’s no one around for her to play with. We’re old goats, boring and dull.”

“And also really incapable of maintaining a conversation that’s not about gossip or work,” Buccaneer added, nodding vigorously. “She’s a nice gal. Works hard, has ideas… I’d gladly let her take my job so I could pressure the general until she lets me get back out there.”

A new guffaw followed his words. They both knew he was never getting back out there.

“I don’t understand…” Miles said, musing. “She’s asked for transport so she can leave. Why is she writing again?”

“Wait, what?” Buccaneer said. He hadn’t heard of this yet and felt immensely betrayed his friend Miles hadn’t told him before. He would have felt doubly betrayed if he’d known Miles had been present for it. “She’s leaving?”

“Yeah, when the storm passes,” Miles replied. “That’s what I can’t wrap my head around. All she has to do is wait it out, but she’s… getting in deeper, somehow.”
Buccaneer made a ‘told you so’ face, eyebrows up, tense smile.

“Has the hots for our boss,” he concluded.

And then the door opened. And it… was their very boss herself.

Julian Buccaneer had thought himself fearless at this point in life. What he hadn’t seen didn’t exist, possibly. Even pain had ceased to be an obstacle for him. At his height, weight, and general complexion, pain couldn’t stop him. Not entirely.

Today he would feel fear for the first time in a long time. And he would not like it.

Olivier stomped into the room and his face fell. He didn’t move, and neither did Miles, and it didn’t take her very long to realize why. She walked to her desk and curiously leaned to see what this piece of paper was, surely another complaint from the number one complainer in her midst, and she almost lost her balance.

She knew this handwriting, she knew this way to link words together, she would have printed every one of those words onto her skin if she had been able to. And… Buccaneer was standing suspiciously close to them. To her words. Words she now had to treasure more than ever, because when their owner left… they would be leaving to. Forever, this time.

On second thought, the words leaving didn’t hurt her the most. They had left before, and she’d mourned them well. But Olivier couldn’t mourn a person who hadn’t passed, just left her.

She’s not leaving you, she’s just leaving.

She glared at Buccaneer, just to test him, just to see if her suspicions were correct. She’d known for a while that they talked about her, because they talked about everything and mainly because Buccaneer had a nonexistent filter when it came to telling stories, untrue or not. But what she hadn’t known is that they’d read something this private. If asked about it prior to this day, she would have defended them and said that such exemplary soldiers would never do something so wrong—and so stupid.

When Buccaneer only smiled nervously and rubbed at the back of his neck, she didn’t need to probe anymore. They were, after all, idiots.

“What is the meaning of this?” she hissed at them both. She didn’t know who her anger was directed towards, the man who couldn’t help himself when in the face of juicy news or the man who before today had always known how to behave spotlessly. “What are you two doing here?”

“Just… chatting,” Buccaneer said. He had the audacity not to wipe that smug smile off his face.

“Chatting…” She tsked. “You could chat in the corridor. If Miles isn’t working,” she continued through gritted teeth, trying to comport herself with dignity—just a shred of it, for the love of alkahestry, “which I understand he isn’t, this place is out of bounds.”

Buccaneer now made a mistake that would spark that old fear back into his old bones. He laughed as if he got to do this every day. Miles cowered by his side, trying not to look like he shared Buccaneer’s views on this.

“Quite an admirer you’ve got there, boss,” he said. “I was starting to think she’d emigrated, like everyone else.”

And that was the last straw. Confirmation? Not only had she suddenly been thrown under a waterfall
of it, but she was also discovering this didn’t go just as far as prying on her private affairs.

Olivier slammed her fist on the table. Miles was surprised it didn’t crack.

“Excuse me?” she bellowed. “How long have you dared to keep this up?”

“Hey, it wasn’t just me, Miles was in on it too,” Buccaneer tried to defend himself.

“OH, I AM NOT JUST CONDEMNING YOU FOR THIS, MAKE NO MISTAKE.” she yelled. “You dare inspect my private belongings, you dare gossip about them among yourselves as if this was a filthy Central magazine, you dare stand here like careless schoolboys and not apologize to me?”

“General, I—” Miles said, trying to appease her. He knew what was coming, and he also knew he wasn’t ready for it. He had always been a loyal adjutant; always standing by her, never against her. This should be disappointing to her, but it also was so to him. He didn’t want to lose her respect, and he had a feeling he might have already. Just now.

“What’s the proper punishment for misconduct towards a superior officer?” she said. “Ah, yes, two years’ imprisonment. For the both of you.”

The two of them gulped in response. They had seen ‘furious’ from her before, even tremendously enraged, but what they were being witness to now went much further than that.

“You had no right, and you leave me with no choice.”

Miles held his breath and closed his eyes as Buccaneer laced an arm with his and squeezed. This was it, then? They were going down, rightfully as they should. Two years… two years in a cell, next to the hellish boilers and surrounded by the judgment of their peers. For… walking the line like fools. They had forgotten, once again, that this woman right here wasn’t their friend. She wouldn’t act like one either just because they might have expected her to.

When Miles opened his eyes again, though, she was tidying up her desk, and her hair hid her face. But she was quiet. Eerily so.

She grabbed a pile of pieces of paper and put them in a drawer, then locked it.

“I never thought I’d have to forcefully keep secrets from you two, of all people.” She was smiling sadly when she turned to them again. Miles couldn’t believe his eyes. All her wrath had faded quickly into something he couldn’t name. And somehow that stirred more than just fear within him. “But it seems it will have to be that way.”

“So…” Buccaneer dared to say. “No imprisonment, then?”

“I’ve accumulated more infractions than anyone else here, and no one of you reported me to the senior officers.” Olivier shrugged. “Fair’s fair.”

Miles couldn’t help thinking that her infractions were normally along the line of refusing to follow protocol every hour of every single day, while they had literally broken and entered into her office to read her private mail.

“Besides,” she continued, “I can’t afford to let either of you go. Especially now.” Now, her face contorted into a more angry expression, more fitting for the situation. “But,” she said, “I won’t be so lenient next time. I don’t care how precarious the situation might be, if this happens again, you will both be imprisoned.”
Buccaneer smirked at Miles, and in that moment she knew that whatever she might threaten to do, they would circle around it anyway. If she forbade them to use the stairs and elevators in the fort, they would grow wings just to defy her without technically ignoring orders.

And that’s how it was. Buccaneer didn’t wait much more than five minutes until he was alone with Miles again to scheme.

“I saw myself inside a cell for a sec there,” he confessed.

Miles punched him in the left arm. If he punched the right, which had happened sometimes when the captain wore long sleeves and Miles forgot which arm was which, his own knuckles would throb for hours.

“What did you learn your lesson yet?”

Miles walked away. Buccaneer followed him hastily.

“Hey, Miles, come on, man. Don’t you see? It gets better. It isn’t just one-way curiosity. It’s not. Did you see her face? Did you see her determination to make us pay?”

Miles turned around, just as determined to end this here and now so he could go on with his tasks.

“Of course I saw. Do you not think she would have sent us to jail for this? Don’t you know her already, Buccaneer?”

“You’re not getting it.”

“I am!” Miles exploded. Buccaneer took a step back to let him calm down. “Look, I’m here because she lets me be. I’m still alive because she pulled strings. I owe it to her to stop this now. You do whatever you want.”

“Miles,” Buccaneer insisted. “This is happening. She’s curious about the girl.”

“She could be curious about a candlestick, it makes no difference to me.”

“What? Scared of some risk, Major?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” he said. “What does it matter if there’s something there? What is it to us? I won’t throw my entire career and survival away just so you can have some laughs.”

“It might’ve been like that at first but…” Buccaneer sighed. “You feel the same way as I do, I know that much. You think it too, that the general deserves to be happy.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “but let her do it her own way. And let’s not get involved in any of it, okay?”

Buccaneer let him go this time, but he couldn’t help thinking that given the precise moment Miles, too, scared as he was of being outted and humiliated for this mistake that was mostly just Buccaneer’s own fault, would position himself here as well.

If Olivier’s happiness was at stake, he knew Miles would risk his own career. Without hesitation.

Buccaneer rubbed his hands together. He needed more people on his side, first, in order to convince him.
Once the thunder started, the tensions within the fort grew. One morning, when Zinnia went to check in the weekly schedule Miles usually had ready by now, she found a big notice on the board warning about patrols having been cancelled because of the weather.

She approached Buccaneer, who was wandering around there with a group of the youngest men, talking animatedly to them with his best gallant grin all ready to charm them into doing whatever he wanted. Probably doing dishes in the kitchens for him, she thought.

“... is everything clear, then?” Buccaneer was telling the men. “Make her feel welcome here, and eventually we’ll see some—” He giggled. “—results from the boss.”

“Yeah, a happy boss means a happy environment,” someone chorused.

There were some laughs, and suddenly they dispersed as the soldiers caught sight of Zinnia coming near them. They all stood straight, chins up, and Buccaneer tried to sneak out, to no avail.

“Going anywhere?” Zinnia asked him.

“Nah, just… you know, I should be getting back to work.” He looked at his wrist as if he had a watch there. “Would you look at the time? I’m late!”

“You look suspiciously distracted today,” she commented with a chuckle. “Anyway, what’s up with the patrols?”

“Oh, right,” Buccaneer said, as the rest of his troupe returned to whatever they’d been doing before. “The general cut them short this week.”

“I thought you were the mighty Briggs soldiers, capable of weathering any storm,” she teased with a huge smile on her face, arms crossed.

“Yeah, that’s in theory, kid,” he said. “In practice it looks pretty undignified to have a bunch of our guys die of hypothermia.”

“Then I might as well find something else to do,” she said, sighing.

Buccaneer saw his chance and seized it without a doubt.

“You know, I heard some guys say they needed help shielding the open areas from the cold. You up for that?”

If she said yes, his plan would slowly come to be a reality.

“I’ll ask around,” she said. “Thanks.”

When she left, Buccaneer celebrated this small victory. One step closer to subtly convincing the girl to stay, one step closer to lifting the general’s spirits, and if things continued that way, maybe she would even forgive him and Miles for snooping. And, besides, this would all circulate around the fort like someone had overthrown the Führer, and they’d have something to talk about for a long, long time.

This could last them the winter.

She found the group of men Buccaneer had spoken of and joined them silently in their task of
cleaning up the areas open to the wind and frost. Someone had to do it, and it was better to do it in the early afternoon that at night, when you might accidentally end up being turned into a stalagmite as well.

It took her by surprise when the men didn’t work in silence like she’d planned and started talking just to offer her a better tool to take the ice off of the ceiling or hand her over a thermos of warm coffee to make the work a bit more bearable.

At some point, even, one of them chitchatted with her.

“Scared?” he asked her.

She laughed nervously. “About what, the storm?”

“Is it your first?”

“It’s just a storm. Can’t get us here,” she said, meaning the fort.

*What the major fuck is going on here?* she wondered, though.

People didn’t change their minds about you overnight, and without any reason behind it. She was still the mess at the kitchens, and pretty much invisible now that she’d stopped asking for things. The final request she’d made had been approved, she had nothing else to ask of the general. She could just wait and make herself useful meanwhile. It was the least she could do, in return for the fort’s… hospitality.

“Not literally,” he said. “Haven’t you ever heard the stories the captain tells?”

“Buccaneer? He tells an awful lot of them.”

“Mostly he goes on about how storms can wreck us from the inside anyway,” he said, “but I think that one’s bullshit to scare the newbies off.”

“Ah,” she said, not knowing what to say to that.

“But he also tells a few about how storms can show you the way.”

Zinnia smiled. “And then he mentions the arm.”

“And then he mentions the arm,” the soldier confirmed it, and they both started laughing.

“Nice way to find one’s way, isn’t it?” she commented after a while. “Trapped inside a military fort because of the weather.”

The man shrugged.

“There’s worse things. You could be trapped here for different reasons.”

And then silence fell, as if this little moment had never taken place. She thought about it. That had been too deliberate, exquisitely deliberate on his part. This was a man whose face rang a bell, because in the end they all lived under the same roof, but Zinnia had never spoken to him before. How did he know to say those words to her?

How did he know her feelings so well to throw them back at her and make her think?

She could summarize it in one word, after a while.
Buccaneer.

He’d set the boys up to let her join this patching up chore of his own orchestration, he’d put them up to chatting with her and plant this idea into her head.

_and why the hell would Captain Buccaneer now want me to stay? What’s in it for him?

Olivier’s mood didn’t recede from anger after the little scene she’d run into with Miles and Buccaneer. She’d let it pass, because she couldn’t afford to think about this for too long. Whatever they’d inferred from those paragraphs was out of her reach, and she was not going to ask them to tell her just to ease her own mind. She had a job to do, above all things, and a mantra to stick to.


A phone rang, scaring her a little. She composed herself when she realized it was her phone and picked it up with reluctance.

“General Armstrong?” they said over the line.

She confirmed that it was indeed her, and how unlucky that she had to be. Anywhere in the country she could go, people would murmur about her behind her back, trying to make their opinions of her the only prevailing truth. Couldn’t she just be another woman, passing unnoticed? Couldn’t she live her life in peace?

What life?

“I’m sorry to have to inform you that the shipment meant to arrive at Briggs this week is to remain on North City because of the weather conditions, ma’am.”

She didn’t bother to correct them on honorifics. She had bigger fish to fry.

“Excuse me?”

She could practically feel the other person cower in fear. Good, she thought. This was the only good thing that had ever come with her reputation.

“I—uh—the transport won’t be able to make it past the storm, I apologize.”

“And what do you expect we will do if we can’t have access to what we need? Shape it all out of rocks?” she croaked.

“There’s… there’s nothing we can do, we’re terribly sorry.”

“Is there anyone in this godforsaken place who knows how to do their job??” she shouted, immediately slamming the phone back on its place and ending the call.

How the hell they were supposed to do without provisions for the whole duration of the storm, she didn’t know. And they couldn’t hunt for food, either.

How the hell was she supposed to survive this, too? How the hell was she supposed to deal with all of this at the same time? The idiots—her idiots—and the girl and everything that came to mind when thinking about the girl, keeping the place ready just in case, and now this. Now this…
His scheming eventually turned into something less abstract. He’d already shared it enough times that he was beginning to forget about who he had told and who he hadn’t.

When Miles had first seen Buccaneer surrounded by men, discussing something very animatedly for it to be work, he had gotten angry and had tried to leave again, alleging how much of a nuisance it could be to be friends with Buccaneer. But he hadn’t been able to stay away from it all for too long. Buccaneer might have been boisterous and had little respect for privacy, but his heart was in the right place, at the end of the day. If he didn’t care about privacy that was about because for as long as he’d been here, he’d had none and he’d lost sight of the limits it defined.

Eventually, Miles had ended up talking to him again. This fort was lonely without his loudness to fill the silence and space. And, little by little, he’d been unable to turn a deaf ear whenever Buccaneer discussed his plan out loud.

The shape of said plan remained indefinite, its goal as the only fixed point on it, and Buccaneer wouldn’t hesitate before bringing it up everywhere. He no longer hid his endeavors, and while Miles couldn’t wrap his head around why he would defy Olivier like that, he could only admire his stubbornness.

“We need to do something,” Buccaneer told him over dinner one day.

“Why do I get the feeling that you already are?”

“I am, but that’s not the point.”

Miles sighed.

“What do you want to do something about?”

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t want the general to kill me when she’s in a mood. And she’d been in a mood for days.”

Miles raised his eyebrow. That was the understatement of the year, possibly the decade as well. “And?”

“And I think I figured out a way to lighten her up a little.” Buccaneer grinned happily.

“Without meddling?”

“Meddling…” he admitted.

“You did say you didn’t want her to kill you, right?”

“She won’t, because she’ll be too happy to,” Buccaneer said. “I’m gonna make Zinnia stay. I’m subtly hinting at it, involving her more, having people compliment her on her outfit—” he said, as if that’s what he thought made girls feel welcome.

Miles raised his eyebrow again, but it felt like the only logical reaction, to act as Buccaneer’s moral compass. Or, at the very least, logical compass. “She wears the same thing we all do.”

“But it looks good on her! It doesn’t look good on all of us. For example, it heightens the beautiful shape of my chest, but it makes you look like a tree trunk.”

Rolling his eyes, Miles focused once again on his food rather than Buccaneer. “Thanks.”
“So that’s what I’m doing at the moment. Do you want in?”

Despite all their bickering and all the shared information, this was the first time Buccaneer was asking directly. It had to count for something.

Miles sighed. “If I did,” he said, “what would I need to do?”

“Olivier doesn’t scare you as much,” Buccaneer said, thinking out loud. He had that thinking face where nothing wrinkled more than as usual but you could still tell he as weighing his options. “You could convince her to force the girl to stay. Or if we ever come up with a real plan to set them up, you could deal with her, push her towards Zinnia without arousing suspicion.”

“I’ll talk to her, then…” Miles yawned. “Without the patrols, I’m bored out of my mind. I might as well.”

“I’ll keep you informed!”

And so he did. He had a few men already working on the environment of the fort, talking more and more people into just being nice neighbors and greet Zinnia in the hallways, although it was still hard for some of them to forget the disasters in the kitchen that Buccaneer himself had criticized so openly and so often. But just like they’d listened to him then, they paid attention to this sudden change of heart he preached every single day of his life. And soon enough, he was sure Zinnia would be surrounded by kindness she hadn’t even realized at first was even there. It was like boiling a frog slowly to keep it from jumping away. Exactly like that.

One morning, while Zinnia and Buccaneer waited for something nice to do once work was over, she mentioned to him in passing about how she missed her books. When she’d asked for some of them to be retrieved from Iver, she’d only requested some of them back, but after a while she’d already reread them too many times and just craved for new stories that she didn’t have to write herself.

Buccaneer had seen the clouds part and the sky shine in that moment. He knew just what to do to keep his plain steady and going.

“Yo, kid,” he told Austin one day in the kitchens, a new and almost official headquarters to his little project.

Austin approached him with respect in his body because he was too scared to actually call it fear. It wouldn’t be the first time Buccaneer called him to send him on a bizarre mission that later turned out to be just a whim the captain had had in that moment. Austin meant to avoid that now if he could.

“Y-yes, sir?” he said, chest puffed up. Buccaneer laughed at his youth. He could use that hidden cuteness to his advantage.

“What’d you think of the new girl?”

“Oh,” Austin said, visibly relieved that Buccaneer wasn’t about to prank him or order him to do something. “She’s… she’s nice. A little quiet. Works hard?” He ended it like a question, unsure of why he was being asked this.

“How would you feel about her staying longer with us?”

Austin blinked. His suspicions of this being just another joke began to rise. “Sir, I don’t know why I…”
“Just answer the question.”

What did the new girl have to do with anything? Austin wondered. Had he been seen with her that one time and now Buccaneer was spreading gossip about him liking her or something? This would turn into the academy all over again in record time if he played it like he had back then.

He cleared his throat and tried not to blush.

“Yeah. I mean, why not?” he said. “The more the merrier.”

Buccaneer patted him in the pack, almost doubling him over.

“Perfect,” he said. “She talk to you much?”

“Not really…” Austin mumbled, praying to whatever deity existed and could be listening that Buccaneer didn’t ask if he liked her. His embarrassment would earn him a nickname for sure.

“Then you’ll do, she won’t suspect you.”

Austin’s gaze was inquisitive.

“I need ya to somehow get it into her head she needs to be at the library tomorrow after lunch,” Buccaneer said, almost in a whisper. He kept looking around to try and see if anyone foreign to his plan was listening. “Can you do that for old Buccaneer?”

Austin rubbed at the back of his neck.

“I… I guess I can, why?”

“Because if this works out, she might stay and help us for a long, long time, kid,” he said, finally leaving Austin alone to the boy’s relief, humming happily a tune to himself.

According to his calculations, if everything had gone as it should, Miles would be upstairs just about to finish convincing Olivier of the same thing. Tomorrow was about to be a memorable day.

Chapter End Notes

It says a lot about me that I reread this looking for typos and instead end up laughing at the dialogue :D
The strangest thing had happened. Olivier had summoned Zinnia via someone else. They shared a room, couldn’t she just say the word before they both got out of bed? Zinnia suspected she was still upset about the scene in the kitchens. She should have never asked something so personal. She didn’t think she’d react any more nicely than Olivier had if someone brought her past up. The past may shape a person up to the very brink of the present, but that didn’t mean its thorns couldn’t wrap around you even years in the future.

Austin, the poor thing, hadn’t known very well how to break it to her. Zinnia had thought up to that moment that he was already a homogeneous part of the fort, all his ties to Central finally gone, but she’d given herself a few more minutes to decide if that was entirely true. He had even shaken a little when he’d told her.

How unkind of Olivier, Zinnia had thought for a second, to have that boy deliver such a message. If she had any problem with Zinnia, she should be the one to address it, not use someone else.

But as Buccaneer used to put it in his fond way, she was the boss of them and if she thought it best, she would do that type of thing. Zinnia didn’t know the full extent of the sacrifices that woman had been ready to make in her years of being a general, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. She was content—and terrified enough—with this much information already.

Her surprise overtook everything else. She couldn’t be afraid for too long, her questions began flooding her neurons and the rest of the world paled in comparison.

*Why the library? I didn’t even know there was one.* She would’ve have gone hide there more often if she had. This place definitely could still surprise her, after so long. If she opened the wrong door, a new aisle would appear and she’d have no choice but to go right in and explore every inch.

Today, though, following Austin’s indications, Zinnia decided to ask Miles for directions. Since the patrols had become a technical impossibility, the man now had little to do, and she convinced herself she wouldn’t be bothering him.

She rapped softly on the door, holding her breath because she was well aware he was seldom alone inside that office, and let all of her air out when she saw that, for once, it was just him.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Zinnia said. “Can you by any chance tell me where the library is?”

Miles didn’t seem particularly busy at the moment, so it didn’t strike her as strange that he immediately stood up.

“It’s better if I show you,” he said, leading the way out of the room. “It’s well-hidden.”

Zinnia was in no way in on Buccaneer’s plan and had no way to guess that Miles was invested in getting it to work. If not because he condoned the involvement per se, at least because he cared about his superior and did think that this meddling could get her somewhere.

Immunity had been bestowed upon him and Buccaneer once. Now, they were counting on their numbers to protect them against Olivier’s justified rage.
After this, Miles heavily suspected she might. She was one of the most cunning soldiers on Amestrian soil. This wouldn’t go unnoticed to her. And still… he felt incapable of turning around.

He took Zinnia to the very doors of the library.

“Anything specific you’re looking for?” he asked her when he noticed her attention had been immediately directed at the dusty dark bookshelves.

He hadn’t spent much time here. He’d never had much time to devote to leisure. And he hadn’t really felt a need to find said time either.

Zinnia shook her head, jaw dropping.

“No, I just…” she said, trailing off in her awe. “Olivier asked me here. D’you know where she might be?”

“She left the office not that long ago,” Miles said, leaning on the door. He’d taken it upon himself to make sure that Olivier did indeed leave for a few minutes, so he could go walk with her later and bring her here. Yesterday he’d asked if she could come with him to the library, because he’d found something he thought she might find useful. And instead of demanding to have that material brought to her, Olivier had agreed to inspecting it herself today.

None of these women had any idea what was going on. Buccaneer would be proud.

“If I cross her on the way down, I’ll let her know you’re waiting,” Miles said, closing the door.

Zinnia toured the small library. She couldn’t believe there were these many books here, and that they always had been right under her nose and she’d never found them. Something as necessary and as entertaining as this and she hadn’t bumped into it during those days she’d had nothing to do but roam free.

She passed fingers over many of them, her pads dustier by the second as she did. If she was still on cleaning duty…

Their titles didn’t grab her, although her heart still beat excitedly at the thought of so much information she could have access to. Now, in this storm, all she could do was wait and push certain thoughts away, so far away they would never come back. As far as she knew, the endless bouts of boredom was a common occurrence to all of the men as well. Without patrols and being able to go outside, they now had a few hours of free time no one knew what to devote to. Most slept or just lounged somewhere; Zinnia, now, had the hunch she might spend them curled over here with a duster and some encyclopedia about flowers or something.

Words… She would be able to let words take her far—actual printed words, not just the one inside her head and on Buccaneer’s waste paper.

“Well?” Olivier’s voice said.

SHIT. Fuck. No. No no no no no.

The door of the library opened and closed in a short slam.

“I left it right here…” Miles mumbled. “Someone must’ve put it back.”

Even if Zinnia couldn’t see it, she was sure Olivier was rolling her eyes. She did that, sometimes, when she was mildly frustrated. She’d cross her arms or frown or roll her eyes, and that meant you
could still grab her attention if you performed well. If, on the other hand, she could barely look at you and her voice carried so much dullness, you’d better try another day. And Zinnia had heard that there came a point when you couldn’t see her fist coming to hit the table, because you were already too frozen to.

The door was opened again.

“Major Miles?” said Austin’s voice.

*Austin again?* Zinnia thought.

“Yes?”

“You’re needed downstairs,” Austin said calmly.

“Ah,” Miles replied. “Very well, then.” There were some footsteps, not too far from where Zinnia was, concealed by the shelves. “I’ll be right back, General.”

Olivier scoffed.

“If you’d like to get started, I think I found it by the encyclopedias. It’s a blue volume.”

Then, Miles left.

And as Zinnia heard Olivier moving in the library, she realized what was hiding there as well with the encyclopedias. Herself.

She immediately picked a book from the shelves, turned her back to the end of the corridor where Olivier would soon enough pop up from, and pretended to be lost between the pages.

Olivier’s breath hitched when she spotted Zinnia there. She couldn’t say she would have picked her out of a crowd, especially in these uniforms that were the crowd, but she didn’t hesitate in ascertaining it was indeed her.

Either this was fate or she’d fallen asleep in the words she’d exited the office to read.

*I was wrong to think that a few days and some interactions would teach me what takes years and so many hardships to learn. That’s why now I am a quiet shadow in the brightest of valleys, because my assigned role here was to witness, never to join, and because for a moment maybe I made the mistake to think that wasn’t an important distinction. I’m not a part of the crowd, I’m not a soldier. But watching you be one makes me feel like perhaps being a shadow gifted me with eyes, and I don’t want to give those up now.*

A crowd of dust and books, a shadow under the light.

And yet Olivier ignored everything else.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, tentative.

She wouldn’t presume to boast about knowing everyone’s schedules, but she was still somewhat shocked to have found the girl here. She always was, to see her outside of the kitchens or their room. Perhaps Olivier had lied to herself in making her brain believe the girl didn’t exist outside of those places. Something *else* of the girl did exist in them, but it was a part of her Olivier herself had crafted trying to set fire to it and send the remaining ashes to oblivion.

Zinnia turned around slowly.
“I, uh…” And just like that Zinnia forgot why she was here.

You, she would have said if she had been brave. *You asked me to come, and I came.*

“What are you doing here?” she managed to say a few seconds after.

“The major meant to show me some book,” Olivier said, realizing as she did that the book the girl was holding in her hands fit the description Miles had given her. She bit her lip. “In fact, if I’m not mistaken, it is that one.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Zinnia said, breaching the space between them in two quick steps. “Here, you can have it. I’m… done with it.”

*I wasn’t even reading it in the first place.*

Fifty Recipes for the Common Rabbit, the title read.

Olivier couldn’t help but let out a tiny snort.

“Maybe not,” she said, giving it back. “We must have more than just one blue book.”

“You… sort them by color?”

“Of course not.”

“Then?”

Olivier sighed. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Wait, I’m…” And now Zinnia realized that it had all been a set up. Because otherwise Olivier would have brought it up already and wouldn’t have suggested Zinnia was doing something important she needed to be alone for.

She took the book anyway.

“How… how have you been?” Zinnia asked, because she hadn’t learned and she never would. What else did she have to lose except time? “Buccaneer’s been saying you look off all week.”

“That man…” Olivier sighed. “I’m fine. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Have you… arranged for my, uh, transfer?”

“I’ll have Austin or someone drive you when this stupid storm clears off…” she sounded really pissed off about the storm. Or, maybe, about the clearing of the storm.

*No, just the storm. No one could possibly get mad about a storm ending.*

“Oh,” Zinnia said. “Thank you.”

“What brings you here?” Olivier asked her, casually leaning on a table nearby. And Zinnia cursed her entire existence for not knowing how to come up with a decent excuse on the spot. What was she supposed to say, ‘your subordinate is up to something, clearly’?

So she just shrugged. You couldn’t ever get it wrong with a shrug. Whatever emotion you were trying to convey would probably get lost in translation and the other person would just infer what they wanted from it.
“Just found this place on accident.”

“I should’ve shown you here before. I recall you like books?” If she was remembering correctly, between the scarce items in the list of things to retrieve from Iver, Zinnia had included books.

Zinnia smiled. “I like words in general.”

“So do I.”

“You do?” Zinnia squealed. “I mean, of course you do.”

Somehow she’d managed to forget how Olivier had locked all her writings under seven keys and not one had ever been destroyed, at least not in her presence. That had to mean something.

“Not all words,” Olivier said. Which was pretty unlucky of her to claim, since previously she’d already fallen off the edge and said equally unfortunate things about liking the girl’s writing. “Miles seems to be taking his sweet time, how would you feel about a tour?”


So Olivier left the table behind and they walked, slowly. Because, really, they were in no hurry. They had nothing else to do, nowhere else to be.

They walked past the same books, over and over. It was a small library, quaint and old and not that varied. Olivier pointed at books she’d read in her youth when she’d needed to get away from reality.

The Mermaid and the Fishermen. A Door to Nowhere. What Remains of Me. The titles piled up and Olivier forgot who she was talking to, who she was baring pieces of her last years of adolescence to. These were tales of fantasy and darkness, a reflection of her soul back then. Now, her own darkness surpassed any that Zinnia could find in these stories.

“All these books under one roof and you came all the way to Iver?” the girl commented, almost joking.

“What I need,” Olivier said, “is not here.”

*What I need doesn’t exist. And even if it did, I’d still need someone to decipher those books for me. I’d still need an alkahestry master to teach us.*

“And what do you need, exactly?” Zinnia asked further. This was books, something safer than the past and simpler than intricate plans for the fort. If she played it right, it might lead to a conversation. A real one.

Of course, holding any expectations regarding this should’ve already alerted her of the idiocy of it.

“That’s not for you to know,” Olivier replied.

“It is, in a way. I tried to help you get it, didn’t I?”

Olivier turned around dramatically. The girl had, of course she had. But it was one thing to involve her in that little heist and another one entirely to divulge the entire plan to her right here, right now, hoping she’d never get caught up in any of it. She wouldn’t, she was leaving… but still… A civilian couldn’t ever know, especially not one that was soon to roam the country again. Anyone could find out. And if Mustang, of all people, found out, Olivier was ready to deny everything to his face. Especially if he knew anything related to alkahestry in the end. She’d rather just fight the war the
“You know once I ask you to stop prying.”

Silence fell, and Zinnia let it stay. An order was an order, even if you weren’t contractually obligated to follow them.

And it was an unbearable thing to have sitting on your chest, this silence. Olivier couldn’t exactly walk away now, and she didn’t even want to. She just couldn’t speak about this as if it was common knowledge. She’d already told the name of it to the girl once, but not what she wanted it for. That was… classified.

“Miles must have been delayed on his way back,” she said after a while, when she couldn’t bear it anymore. The girl obviously wasn’t leaving any time soon, and she was supposed to wait for Miles here, but he was obviously not returning any time soon. “It’s not like him to keep me waiting.”

Zinnia did her best at appearing serious and innocent since she was as guilty as Miles for orchestrating this, now that she suspected what was happening.

Olivier turned to meet the girl’s eyes.

“Are you hungry?” she said.

“Am I… hungry?” Zinnia repeated.

Her brain couldn’t find the logic that tied those two last sentences together. Miles and hunger? What did that have to do with anything? She couldn’t keep up.

“Yes,” Olivier said calmly. “It’s almost lunch time.”

Zinnia went red in the face. She’d read too many stories where this innocent little question about getting food led to places Zinnia wouldn’t even get to daydream about here.

“A little, yeah,” she said.

Olivier smiled one of those rare smiles that made her seem like a reflection, a ghost of her usual self. Some were gifted with the ability to see past that and understand that her emotions were just as human as everyone’s, only she’d pulled the brakes on some of them.

“So am I,” she said. “Shall we?”

Zinnia smiled back and almost asked what about Miles, but she let it go. Miles wasn’t coming back, Miles had absolutely nothing to do in this tiny library, Miles wouldn’t miss them. She let Olivier lead the way, and shook her head in private so she wouldn’t get caught being part of a scheme she wasn’t in on entirely. *Now all there’s left to do is find out what that man was thinking to have us both be in the same room for a while. It’s not like we’ve become best friends. It’s not like we’re even friends, per se.*
Whatever the plan was, whatever its intentions, Zinnia didn’t pay much attention to any of it. She let the captain and the major subtly talk her into doing things, going places, and wait an extra five minutes in the kitchen. It wasn’t always them actually talking to her, but their words still hung there in the air, and she heeded them.

What else was there to do in a fort in the middle of a storm? Waiting, perhaps. And a runner like her had no heart for waiting.

But Olivier, who up until now had just focused on work and keeping her emotions at bay, didn’t remain as blind to this as everyone might’ve hoped. She noticed the groups of men gathering around her when she walked by, smiling at her as covertly as they could, given the circumstances. She noticed the giggles and the overly friendly greetings, and she hated it. She hated every minute of it. She burned with the desire to punish Miles and Buccaneer for it, as she should have the first time.

Yet… every time chance got her in the same room as Zinnia, Olivier stayed and calmed down and reminded herself that no one but her had real control over her life. She could always step out of wherever they were both nudged against each other, she could always be rude and unkind and return to her duties. She stayed because she wanted to.

Because, maybe, deep inside her she wondered what was truly going on and what could come out of this. At first, Olivier flinched at Zinnia’s ‘good morning’ and her shy smiles. It made her heart stop in her chest for a moment, and nothing that could make her feel like this should be allowed to stay. But with time, she just… relaxed at how common these occurrences were, at how soft the girl’s face was. Olivier liked to pretend she was objectively observing a reality. Studying something to better understand it.

And that was why she began to answer Zinnia’s questions without getting especially defensive. She had nothing to defend, nothing to lose, nothing to win. Just time in her hands and boredom and frustration to kill. Why not talk? Why not get to know her guest? Why not… let the general disappear for a moment or two? That part of her would always come back later, Olivier could afford to overlook it from time to time. She wanted to overlook it, and she was the first one to be surprised by that.

Zinnia had experienced a bit of… cautionary worry about this. When her prying inquisitiveness had started to be treated kindly and rewarded with the information she’d been after, Zinnia had built up a wall in her heart. She’d expected the other shoe to drop immediately. And when it hadn’t, not once, she’d ended up asking more questions, talking more and more.

It was no easy thing, to grow closer to someone like Olivier. But… she thought she was doing something similar. Late at night, like never before, they even lay down for some minutes before sleep and just told stories. Old and new.

They both had pounding hearts in their chests, they both felt they wouldn’t be able to pull this off convincingly, and both of them thought the other was perfectly steady.

Nevertheless, in all her missing out on the obvious, Zinnia had learned that if she wanted this to go on without the active participation of Briggs’ worst gossips, she needed to stay up. Olivier came back to the room late, with very rare exceptions, and she’d always take a few minutes—sometimes even longer than an hour—to fall asleep.

So Zinnia took to staying up to wait for her, to make that time worthwhile. She didn’t care if it was midnight or three am. This was her calling the shots, sailing her own ship. She had control over what happened, between these four walls. And as much as her stomach churned because that control was still only one part of it, Zinnia loved that these moments being spontaneous meant that this was no
longer just a plot from Miles and Buccaneer.

This was real.

When the door opened one night, its familiar creek warned Zinnia that she should sit up on the bed and appear alert. Olivier walked in, looking like the storm outside their windows. Her hair wrapped around her neck almost like the coat she was wearing did, and her eyes… shone with stale light.

They met Zinnia’s with increasing ease.

“I hope you do know you’re under no obligation to wait for me every night,” Olivier said, softly. “I’m not going to forget where I’m supposed to be sleeping.”

She took off her coat in what seemed to be slow motion to Zinnia. She made it look easy. When Zinnia had to take any clothes off, she’d end up getting tangled in the sleeves. It was a spectacle. This, though, was a show you’d have to queue for hours to get in.

“I know—I just…” Zinnia said as Olivier forgot about room-sharing rules and began changing right in front of her. She looked away, to respect Olivier’s privacy and to protect her own sanity. “It’s less lonely this way.”

Olivier’s face showed a faint ghost of a lopsided grin.

“It’s not like I kiss you goodnight when I come in.”

They both blushed intensely at the implications of that being a reality. Zinnia hid in the covers a little bit more.

“No, you don’t,” she said, maybe wanting her to.

Maybe.

“Then it’s okay for you to go to bed when you want to,” Olivier said, getting comfortable on the floor. After so long, it no longer was as much of a terrible place to sleep on.

“Oh,” Zinnia said, “you’re assuming I don’t.”

“Guess there’s not much I can do about that, then.”

“Actually, yes,” Zinnia replied with a sly smile.

Olivier stared at her. “Enlighten me.”

“You could go to bed at a decent hour,” Zinnia said.

And Olivier… actually laughed.

Actual laughter. The real kind, the one that stops at nothing.

It wasn’t such a bad sound to fall asleep to.

“Mornin’” they told her.

“Morning!” she’d reply. So many of them had started taking detours in the kitchens just to say hi.
She’d gone from feeling like the last person on earth to practically being bombarded with niceness all day long. And Zinnia no longer knew if that was part of the scheme, or if she was hallucinating things.

When had this begun to happen? And did she want it to stop? At least she’d finally learned more names—slowly, and after screwing them up repeatedly over the days (she still called Austin ‘Dallas’, for some reason).

“You’re solicited lately,” Olivier commented.

She, too, had stopped communicating via growls most of the time. It was like… they’d both lost the more exterior part of their filters and now simply didn’t care too much about whatever they were doing. It was just a pastime.

One wasn’t supposed to put much thought into pastimes.

“I think they like me now because I helped clean the other day.”

“It’s not hard to like you. You’re efficient.”

“Oh.” Zinnia blushed without being able to spot it happening. Efficient, she thinks I’m efficient. If anyone had read into her mind then, they would only have heard giggling. It only lasted for a second, though, she soon composed herself. “Well, not everyone thinks that. Back with my parents, I was never enough.” She smiled. “And they, too, despised my cooking.” She made an adorable wrinkly face when she realized how much of a lie that was. “Not my dad, though. He’s always content with everything.”

“And your mother?”

And Zinnia believed this was the first question Olivier had ever asked her. The first personal question, and it had to be about something so… unpleasant, something that made her stomach forget it had been hungry two seconds ago.

“She’s more of a sculptor than a mother,” Zinnia said, laughing to conceal the awkwardness. “It’s the price to pay for being an only child, parents might want to turn you into better versions of them, and since they’ve no one else to focus that effort on, it falls on you. I don’t know if you have any siblings, but yeah…”

“I do. Four of them.”

“Wow…”

“But still… I can relate to dubious mother figures.”

Olivier took a sip from her drink.

Zinnia went for it. Fuck it. She’s a wall, she’ll stop me if she wants to.

“What’s your mother like?” Her entire chest surged with nerves at having asked that. She shouldn’t have, she should’ve shut up and just kept on talking about her own life. Zinnia had no business in Olivier’s past and story.

Olivier, on the other hand, sat back on her chair and thought of a way to put it that wouldn’t sound inconsiderate. Which it would still be.
“Old-fashioned.” And yes, Olivier thought, that was probably the best way to describe her. From head to toe, Gwendolyn Armstrong oozed the air of past centuries, not her own. If she and Olivier stood side by side, nobody would say they belonged in the same history period, even if they did resemble each other. Olivier had her mother’s eyes. Cold and hard as diamond, her father’s downfall, once. Now a wall of ice that stood between two warring countries.

And, almost moved by the memories themselves, Olivier started talking.

“Quite like your own, in fact.”

“Is it any different, being a sister instead of just a daughter?”

Olivier laughed softly, softer than before. “Not much.” She sighed. “I was the family project. Put this on, behave this way, read this and not that, attend this party, look for a husband—” Olivier chuckled to herself. As if. “My mother planned to have me inherit. I was eldest, after all.” Zinnia couldn’t help but notice that ‘was’. “But she didn’t wait too long after I left to name Alex the next Armstrong heir.”

Zinnia leaned on her open palm, elbow on the table. She’d forgotten all about the food, and the conversations around her. All of her mind was focusing on this one story, this one woman, and one word of it at a time.

“Shit, and I thought my mother was bad.”

“It’s not a competition. And, in my case, it ceased mattering a long time ago. I’m not just a descendant of a rich family, I have a country to protect.”

“So,” Zinnia asked, interested, and more than just the story but her own, the details of it that matched, “it gets easier.”

“You’re an adult, you should know the answer to that already.”

Zinnia looked down. “Why’d you think I left?”

“Why?”

“It wasn’t getting any easier.”

“And has it, far away from there?”

Zinnia laughed. “No.”

“Let me give you a piece of advice,” Olivier said. “It doesn’t really matter if it gets easier, it’s still going to be there. Either if it’s just for a day a year or every morning when you remember it. Accept it and move on. I’m sure you have bigger things to worry about.”

“Starting a war?”

“Eating your food,” Olivier pointed out. “This isn’t your war.”

“It’s no one’s war. It’s not even a war yet. How can you be so sure it will be one day?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Up until now you’ve let me. Or should I interpret this to be one of those ‘stop prying’ moments?”
Olivier looked her in the eye.

“What I know is that it’s always been a war. Just because there’s no enemy fire for a while doesn’t mean they’re not plotting to resume it anytime soon. And it is my war. It’s always been my war…”

And a war much bigger than the one waiting to be waged against Drachma, too.

The day progressed in the usual direction, Olivier went to hide in her office and Zinnia visited the library again. It was a quiet place to write, and she had plenty to pour on the page. They might’ve crossed each other when Zinnia was coming up from an early dinner and her pockets crammed with new writings she was especially proud of in their subtility and style, but they didn’t mention anything related to personal life until later, when Olivier walked in, too done to stay up honing a headache.

“Long day?”

“Long life,” Olivier replied. She settled into the routine of removing layers and adding new ones, then preparing the mat for the floor. She’d stopped caring about baring skin, she’d stopped believing there were any prying eyes in the room with her.

She turned off the light before she got under the covers. She always made sure to hobble the thinnest blankest out of the few she owned, and she was certain the flower girl had no idea. Stubborn as she was, Zinnia would have argued.

Then—

“Does your mum dress like women did some years ago?” Zinnia asked in a small voice, as if she felt ashamed of the question.

It was a perfectly good one. Perfectly safe, too.

So Olivier told her, softly, about many-layered skirts and corsets and the closets her mother had, filled with enough fabric to wrap around a whale. Olivier told Zinnia about the clothes her mother would use for different occasions, as well, and what the criteria had been for choosing an outfit. They weren’t fond memories, but Olivier was glad she still had them, if only to share them with someone as something curious, not punishing.

Zinnia was kicking her feet up in the air at this point, unable to contain her giggles. They sprouted out of her like pollen and she let them. She made it seem easy.

“How many changes of clothes?”

“Three a day,” Olivier answered. “More, if there were any special events.”

Gowns so delicate understanding their structure would take too long. Olivier had never managed to learn how to properly put them on, she’d seen no practical application for it. She’d never have to dress herself in one of those horrid things, and… she’d doubted that in the unlikely case she was to undress a woman in such clothing she couldn’t just rip it off.

“I’m struggling really hard not to imagine you in one of those ugly gowns right now.” Zinnia kept laughing like this was the best story in the world to her, and Olivier managed a quick smile as well. A passing thought came to her to tell the flower girl about the arguments with her mother about those dresses Olivier never even considered wearing, but she chose to let that go and continue this beautiful notion of camaraderie that had been born out of something so trivial.
“And that’s because you haven’t seen the shoes.”

“Oh god, shoes?” Zinnia squealed. “What kind of shoes?”

“Have you ever seen catalogs from a couple of decades ago?”

“Probably, but I don’t remember. I’m not big on them.”

“They’re useless, small, and too thin to be comfortable,” Olivier explained, gladly. All of this was so… new to her. The anecdote wasn’t even funny to her, but she wasn’t the most knowledgeable person in matters of humor. “And they have more laces than you can imagine. But you should see the accessories.”

Zinnia imagined Olivier in full attire and, even in almost complete darkness, had to face the wall in order not to look like a giggling mess, which she was not exempt from resembling anyway. Olivier didn’t mind, it was almost forcing her to smile as well too.

“What?”

“N-nothing…” Zinnia kept hiding behind her hands. “I just…” Her voice was still drowned by laughter. It was the most beautiful thing Olivier had ever been witness to, sunrise from the top of the wall included. “I just feel so lucky I never had to deal with any of that.”

Olivier chuckled softly, as if to pretend she wasn’t. “Neither did I.”

“Saved by the uniform,” Zinnia managed to say in her most serious tone, only to disappear into another cloud of hiccuppy giggles.

“You were saved by butcher’s blood. That’s not the climax of excuses, either.”

She remembers? Zinnia thought. Sometimes she mentioned her parents’ business, but not often, and she didn’t think she must’ve told Olivier more than one or twice. She remembers…

She blushed like a little girl and said:

“Shut up. None of my dresses ever had any blood on them.”

“You never wear them now,” Olivier said. And it was only now that she realized just how very specific this was. It meant she’d paid attention, and she didn’t want to look like she was actively doing that. No matter how little her pride mattered now, some things should still remain neutral. This felt, to her, like trespassing.

Zinnia finally calmed down enough to lay on her back on the bed.

“I’d clash with the place,” she said, still al little breathless.

“Maybe you’d brighten it.”

Zinnia snorted at the idea. She certainly had yellow enough dresses to almost shine. She would walk among them and their faces would turn to look at her, calling attention to herself like she didn’t care. And maybe she didn’t. Now, at least, Zinnia was forgetting that her days here were numbered and that one of those little details of a life mattered—or should have mattered—to her. In her heart, she’d forgotten all about leaving. This moment in the dark had brought an old flame back to life.

“I’d be wearing a target on my face,” she said, in the end. However amusing the fantasy was, she’d never brave up walking around in a silly dress. Not now. “And I like your soldiers’ friendly greetings
more than I can say. I’m not ready to give that up just yet.”

Olivier sighed. Soon you will, anyway. Soon you’ll give all of this up.

Even if Olivier had the power to change that, to impose her will over everyone else’s like many did in her position, no matter how hard she tried to convince herself to, she always backed down from the notion when it came to tethering Zinnia to the fort. She couldn’t fail this promise she had made. When the last clouds receded, Olivier would provide a car and a driver. Because she couldn’t have a selfish say on this, it wasn’t any of her business. If the flower girl wanted to leave, that want would be honored as a last gift. As a first one.

She took in the sight of the small room with flower paintings on its walls, because she knew it was the last time she’d be here. Olivier sat on the bed as Ianthe looked for something she’d been meaning to show her (some new type of seed, perhaps.)

“My train leaves in a few hours,” Olivier mumbled. She couldn’t say she ever spoke in such a tone. She’d been trained for silence and compliance where it was asked of her, but this was a place for freedom, not subjugation.

She wasn’t too sure Ianthe had heard her. She just kept rummaging in her desk and drawers.

“That’s okay, I’ve most of my stuff ready,” Ianthe said without turning around, probably proud of her preemptive packing. “I can’t take my plants with me but—“ Ianthe smiled mournfully over her shoulder. Her eyes held so much love in them that Olivier couldn’t help but let guilt trap her in them for just a little longer. “—there’s still trees up north, right?”

Trees, and snow, and dirt. Men and gunpowder. A chaos that now bore her name.

“You can’t come with me,” Olivier finally said, voice a little firmer. A little more self-assured than before. She wasn’t asking for permission, she was putting an end to things.

“And why not, huh? It’s a free country.” Ianthe said, still not keeping up, still caught in her quest for her seeds.

Now Olivier had to lie. Lie like a ruler and lie for the wellbeing of this small hurricane. She had to say words that never in her life she would have even considered. Ianthe held love in her eyes, Olivier did so in the space between her words and her actions. Over the months, Ianthe had been able to pinpoint the exact balance out of those two that made for honest displays of love. But, for this, Olivier had had to learn to neutralize one of the two. Her words shooed Ianthe away, her body still welcomed her in and would never let her go. She’d had to freeze her body up in stiffness that wouldn’t really leave her after this day.

“You’ll be a nuisance,” Olivier finally said. Something broke inside her when those words made it out of her. “I can’t keep this up and hope to be someone in the military.”

“As if they’d let you be.” Olivier had told Ianthe the truth about the academy, about those men who feared anything that wasn’t like them. But she’d ceased to be so honest about the reason why she was being sent so far away—to a battlefield.

Olivier couldn’t arrive to the border with Drachma hand-in-hand with a girl. Civilians weren’t even allowed on the fort.

Ianthe stopped to look at Olivier. She walked closer to her, a calm expression on her face, and tried to take her hands in her own. Of course, Olivier thought, she has to at least try to touch me into staying.
It wouldn’t work this time. It couldn’t.

“I’m not kidding,” Olivier said, pushing her hands away, gently. Deep inside, it hurt like nothing else before. But this was the choice she’d made, the right choice. I’ve sworn to protect this country, and you’re the most important person on it. I can’t let you face war for me. “You can’t come.”

Ianthe now seemed to realize the seriousness of it. Her eyes were watery and her nose a little smaller than usual, as if she was holding in air. She was obviously about to cry, but she didn’t. Olivier knew she wouldn’t. She was too proud for that.

“So this is the true you…”

“Yes,” Olivier lied again.

“Just another power-hungry soldier,” Ianthe spat, walking backwards away from her, face contorted into a grimace of wrath. She was no longer seeing her girlfriend sitting there on her bed, making small mistakes. She was seeing the enemy.

Olivier held her glare as well as she could, having learned well to fear and respect that wrath. But her own eyes didn’t carry a declaration of war, just a longing she had no name for. “I just wanted you to know. That’s all.”

“Well, now your conscience’s clear. Get the hell out of my house!”

Ianthe’s mum called from her living room, “Honey, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, don’t worry.” Ianthe looked at Olivier again in a way that admitted no reply whatsoever and growled between her teeth: “Get out.”

And Olivier did. She couldn’t help, once the door had been slammed behind her, but looking at the house she’d spent such beautiful times at. The magnolia tree under which life had seemed sweeter, somehow. The bed where Olivier had forgotten about her inadequacy everywhere else she went. The family she’d found that had nothing to do with her own, that had welcomed her in as if she was their own.

And none of that would be hers from now on. Ice, snow, steel, and concrete would replace it.

She returned to her quarters at the academy to fetch the few things she was taking with her, then headed for the train station. The few strange looks she got because of the sword her father had given her barely days ago, when he’d heard of the news, distracted her from reality. For a moment, she almost felt as if nothing had changed and in a while she could take off all her armor of hate and frustration and be young and careless again in the arms of a botanist.

You could still turn around…

She still had time until the train departed. She could perfectly well head back to the house and tell Ianthe that nothing she’d inferred from that conversation was true. But then… Ianthe wouldn’t be able to dissuade Olivier from accompanying her all the way to the north. To the war, to the most solitary, harshest place in the country.

Olivier didn’t have the heart to be selfish and root for love when that love could so easily be destroyed by horrors Ianthe hadn’t even heard about.

She’d be marching right into the trenches, and doing so hand-in-hand with a soldier didn’t guarantee any rates of survival.
The station was buoyant with activity. This wasn’t called Grand Central for nothing. More trains left every day from these platforms than people lived in the small towns surrounding Central City. Olivier found a less transited spot to sit in while she waited.

She was expected in Fort Briggs in about eight hours, with nightfall. Her train would surely be crowded with more soldiers, all sent north to atone for something their superiors hadn’t agreed with. And she only began to fathom the true number of troops that were to meet her same fate as the departing time neared and the platform she was on began to fill with blue uniforms. Some faces, she already knew; some she would get to know in time.

Then, in the chaos of bags and soldiers and loved ones, Olivier saw something that didn’t make her wish she could send them all away and board the train alone.

A loved one.

Ianthe.

Olivier had even allowed herself one tiny smile that day. Because it had always been a lovable trait in her girlfriend, that uncanny ability to be petty, so petty sometimes it made Olivier laugh. Of course Ianthe had come all that way, after having slammed the door shut right in Olivier’s face, just to make it clear who had the last word.

When you’re looking for something to place the blame on, remember that it was your ambition that did this, Ianthe had said to her that day on the station.

Not my ambition, Olivier thought now, facing a very different woman in a very differing setting. Not my ambition, Ianthe… My cowardice.

Their relationship wouldn’t have survived the first two months on Briggs grounds. Ianthe might have been brought down by enemy fire, found out and deported, kidnapped and executed.

My cowardice… and my desire to protect you. Sometimes they are the same thing.

How quaint, how little things had changed. Wasn’t Olivier being that same young coward right now, years after she’d won wars and commanded entire battalions of men, all in the name of protecting someone?

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know what I’m most proud of in this chapter, the Austin-Dallas joke, the fact that I chose a pretty cool name for Olivier's mum, or my naming Central's station after New York City's XD

(in fact I think it’s the flashback at the station as a whole, I was so looking forward to reading that one ^^)
The best things in life tended to be the ones you took for granted and only ever realized how much they meant to you after you were denied access to them.

For a few days, Zinnia had stopped looking out of the window and instead had begun looking in. Somehow there had ceased to be a line separating the parts of the day she shouldered on through and the ones she awaited.

Maybe doing dishes wasn’t her favorite part of the day, though. But Buccaneer had a gift for making everything either three times as unbearable or a little bit less hard on one’s body.

She attributed this sudden lack of anguish to her return to writing. The words had taken over for everything she’d kept inside her before, and she felt she actually had less things to worry about. It was like… they had been channeled away from her.

And she wasn’t complaining.

That morning, when she was going to Buccaneer’s department for another few long hours of mostly inactivity and gossip, she noticed the board was adorned once again with the huge schedule for the patrols for this week.

That could only mean one thing: the storm was over.

She walked closer to the noticeboard to see when it was her turn to pitch in, and to her surprise she found out that her name was in neither of the many occupied slots.

Either Miles had made a mistake or…

“Hey, kid,” Buccaneer’s voice called, a few steps away. He walked closer to her. “Boss is waiting for you.”

“Did she say why?”

Buccaneer shrugged.

“No idea, but hurry it the hell up, I mean to get started on a more decent map today.”

Zinnia just stood there. She was really going to leave this time. She had asked for transport, she had asked for permission. And she was being granted all of that now.

But… why did she feel so breathless at the thought of it being real? This storm had lasted long, but not long enough. She’d expected it to rain and blow heavy for some more days. Always some more days, never a specific number.

She had wanted to leave.

Buccaneer rolled his eyes. “Well? Do you need me to come with you or what?”

“No, I just—”
“Too late, I’m going with ya now.”

“Ooookay,” she mumbled. “But I thought you were busy with that map.”

“We are,” he grumbled.

Buccaneer still had hopes that his plan had worked and this was that moment in which everything changed and his boss declared her undying love for this scrawny woman with her head in the clouds. It was so improper of the setting, and yet he didn’t hesitate about it once. He hadn’t noticed the clear skies today, either. Nor the schedules lacking one name.

Zinnia’s entire being shook in painful anticipation. She kept telling herself that maybe Olivier had forgotten, and that this little meeting had nothing to do with transport. Maybe she wanted to keep training her. Maybe she wanted to talk about dresses again.

Or maybe she’s just doing her job, putting you on a truck to take you far away.

And she hadn’t even packed. She’d been so preoccupied lately with the development of things and how nice the fort seemed when people weren’t blaming her for some thing or the other, even in such a storm, that she hadn’t actually worried about getting her things ready. She would have to give her uniforms back, she’d have to retrieve materials from Buccaneer’s desk.

Zinnia gulped audibly.

Leaving would take all day. And it would hurt for even longer.

“You’re shaking like a leaf,” Buccaneer pointed out.

“It’s cold.” Zinnia shrugged.

“You’re still afraid of her?” Buccaneer laughed.

“I’m not afraid!” she said, her pitch too high, giving her away for entirely the most different reason of all.

“Right…” he side-eyed her and smirked. “Maybe she wants to give your project the green light.”

“Since when has it been my project?”

“Since now that you gotta defend it to her,” he said with a huge grin on his face as he pushed the door open for Zinnia. “Off you go.”

Zinnia walked into the office as if this was the very first time she was seeing it. She hoped Buccaneer was right. She could at least pull off a half-decent argument in favor of a new route, the one she’d drawn, but she could never—in her life—stand there as what she’d once wanted became something she had to do in order not to disrespect the woman who had housed her and made this possible.

Miles sat there in his usual non-involvement with whatever Olivier chose to bring into her office, holding all the truths in his capable hands. If only Zinnia could just ask him for help now. She didn’t need him to be her eyes or ears, she just needed his voice. Her own wouldn’t be enough.

“Your car has arrived,” Olivier announced without preambles. She had bags under her blotchy eyes, and Zinnia would have bet money that she hadn’t slept much that night. Or she might have cried herself to sleep, which Zinnia doubted very much. She had seen Olivier stay up on repeated occasions, and she always woke up with a face so very similar to the one she was sporting now.
“Oh…”

She couldn’t say this was unexpected, but she’d still wanted to think about everything but this. It was so soon, too soon.

“North City sent a driver as well. He’s waiting for you outside the main gate. I suggest not making him wait too long.”

“I… um… I hadn’t actually…” Zinnia shook her head and took a deep breath. She had to get her thoughts straightened up in her head to be able to speak like a normal person. “I haven’t made arrangements yet about… my housing situation.”

“And what the hell were you waiting for?” Olivier told her off.

“I just need to make a few phone calls.”

If she could remember the number of the library Candie used to call for the book orders, then maybe they’d be able to contact Candie herself. If Miles had been right and all Iver inhabitants moved to North City in the winter, it would only be a matter of making the right calls.

Olivier pushed her phone closer to Zinnia instead of answering.

“Major, tell the driver to get a coffee as he waits. It might be a while.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, immediately getting up. He succinctly grabbed Buccaneer by the arm and dragged him away from the door where he’d been standing, sensing that the captain wanted to eavesdrop on that conversation Miles himself had been sent away from. Nobody liked Briggs’ coffee, and the driver was probably already lounging somewhere, aware that these things took time.

Zinnia’s shaky hands needed a few tries to recall the number, but once she did, everything came back to her and she was able to talk to the person on the other side of the line without letting it show she was at a loss. She’d asked to leave but she’d never planned what she would do once she could, and now when she got on that car and arrived to North City, she’d have nowhere to go. And it would still be cold there.

After a couple of minutes, she was given Candie’s second residence’s phone number, and a weight lifted off her chest. Candie wouldn’t bail out on her. She never had. She probably had spent these past many weeks wondering where Zinnia had gone.

“Who’s this?” the familiar voice of Candie said over the phone.

She could cry from joy if she wasn’t in public.

“It’s… Zinnia. From Iver.”

Candie actually squealed.

“Oh my god, child, where have you been? I didn’t see you after moving out of town, I was starting to get a little worried.”

Zinnia chose to overlook the fact that she’d known nothing about the town’s tradition of moving out and focused on what she needed now. There would be an entire winter to tell her the story of Briggs and ask her to please keep her updated on more traditions like this one.

“I’m okay,” she said. She didn’t mention Briggs now, though, she was sure Candie would have
loved that, but she wasn’t in the mood for teasing right now. And not in this office, either. “I’m heading to North City, and I was wondering if I could stay with you for a few days till I find somewhere else.”

“Zinnia, you silly woman, you can stay for as long as you want,” Candie said. “Besides, we have to catch up.”

“Okay, thank you so, so much. You don’t know how much this means to me, I will make it up to you as soon as I can and—”

“Don’t worry about it, kid,” Candie said. “When are you getting here?”

“Probably in a few hours.” Probably less, since there was already a car waiting. Zinnia should have felt important that an entire vehicle had been rented for her, but all she felt like was a disaster.

“Okay, then I’ll give you an address so you can just come straight here.”

“Thank you,” Zinnia said a second time. She felt a great surge of tears coming and she only hoped she’d make it out of this room in time so no one saw her cry. And not precisely of joy now.

She hung up the phone right after noting down the address.

“Well?” Olivier asked.

“My old boss will take me in.”

“Wonderful.” It was uttered so dully that Zinnia waited a few seconds, unsure of what should technically follow this exchange, and then just opted for standing up.

She was leaving. They had… grown to be quite civil with each other, with time. Would Olivier really mean for it to end like this? Would Zinnia allow it?

She had all the power now, the last word. Hadn’t she always wanted it?

So she looked down at the face she’d seen asleep, angry, happy, and tired. The face she’d dreamed about and daydreamed about and tried to erase from her brain because none of this made sense.

And Olivier didn’t pretend that this display of eye contact wasn’t happening. She stared back.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Miles whispered to Buccaneer, who presently had an ear against the closed door, trying to hear what was going on. “Do you want to be imprisoned?”

“Shut up, I can’t hear…”

“That’s because you shouldn’t!”

Buccaneer unglued his ear momentarily from the door.

“Oh, shut up, Miles, you want to hear this more than me.”

His face shifted all of a sudden. He slammed his metal arm on Miles’s chest.

“She’s leaving.”
“What?”

“She really is.” Buccaneer’s face was alarmed.

“It didn’t work, then.” Miles sounded affected, but not too much.

Blue. That was what Zinnia would take away from these few seconds. So much blue. She could build a house of it, hide inside so no one would ever dare move her from that spot. In her dreams, it was hers. In reality, it belonged to no one, and wanting it only made it harder for her to enjoy.

So many days here, chasing that blue, living in its shadow. It all came down to this one moment. And how intensely Zinnia hoped she could make it last forever.

Neither of them looked away. For some reason or another, they didn’t want to, and they didn’t think. This was the last self-indulgence, the last stupid joke and the last personal question with no real answer.

I lived in a military fort for so long I’d forgotten I myself was only a civilian. I saw that truth in the general’s eyes. And I knew I would never be welcome here, not the way I want to be, Zinnia wanted to write. But right now she could only block those words, let them come back to her later when she was alone. Truly alone, for the first time in a long time.

Alone in a city she didn’t know, alone in the winter.

Winter… She never showed me, the winter from the top of the wall.

Olivier, in the end, offered her a hand to shake. She didn’t like goodbyes, yet this time she had no choice but to honor it, for it partly was her fault it was taking place.

Zinnia took that hand in hers, unable to look away. Not yet. Soon but not yet.

“So, I guess this is it, then…” she mumbled.

“Yes,” Olivier just said. She pulled her hand away. Zinnia almost asked to hold it again. Almost. “Goodbye.”

Zinnia nodded and stared into those blue eyes for just one moment longer. Then she walked out of the room. She smiled sadly at Miles and Buccaneer. Despite herself, she would miss them. She would miss this.

But she wasn’t allowed to stay here anymore.

It was only when she was on her way to the room to fetch her clothes that she realized she hadn’t reciprocated that farewell. Out of fear, out of an inexplicable desire to somehow nullify it, but she hadn’t. And now she never would be able to.

A single tear fell from her eyes.

Goodbye…
Both men barged in Olivier’s office like the world was ending, like Drachma had just broken their truce and was marching towards the fort. Their urgency scared her at first, then she saw it in their faces. And she knew every single pretense she had clung to in the past few days had just evaporated.

This was reality knocking on her open door.

"General, you really won’t… do anything?" Buccaneer asked softly. “It’s not too late yet.”

But it was. It was most likely that the girl would already be getting her few scant things, and how long did it take to go down the stairs? How long did it take to get into a car and drive away?

Olivier refused to look out of the window, regardless of how she sched to do that very thing and confirm her suspicions were right.

"What do you suggest I do? Chase her down?"

“YES!” Buccaneer almost yelled.

Miles elbowed him to shut him up and stepped forward to speak up himself.

When it mattered the most, he didn’t fear a prison cell or losing his job. When it mattered the most, he knew what lines to cross and how to cross them. Sometimes, although he’d never admit it to Buccaneer, one just had to meddle.

And this was his intervention, for better or worse.

"Olivier…” he said. “You know what you should do. Do it. "

"You dare giving me an order, Miles?” she replied, voice barely on the brink of normalcy. Olivier was tired and walking towards her own defeat, dragging her feet on the ground. Why did she have to keep on stretching this? The girl was lost to her already, she had been so from the moment she had asked to be let out, and Olivier had made her choice. For once, losing hadn’t felt like dishonor to her, but rather the right thing to do.

"No. But …” Miles sighed. He didn’t have the slightest clue how to word this quickly in a way that made sense, in a way she would feel compelled to listen to. “You will regret not stopping her.”

And she deflated, visibly, in front of him and Buccaneer.

She turned to finally take a peek at the world beneath the window. She saw the car, still not moving. Her heart began to pound uncomfortably. She still hasn’t gotten on it.

A ticking clock, this heart of hers would be.

If she acted soon, she could still stop this. She had been wanting to for so, so very long, refusing to because it wasn’t fair. But life wasn’t fair. This fort didn’t play by those rules.

*Here at Briggs only the strong survive.* And she had ‘strong’ literally embedded into her name.

Heart hammering against her ribs, emotions whirl-pooling in her brain, she listened.

*You will regret not stopping her,* Miles had said.

*I regret not having stopped her already.*

“To your posts,” she said as she pushed through them, already running. “Don’t wait for me.”
Indeed, in a way, a war was being waged. Not against Drachma, but perhaps this would be a harder defeat to process.

A wall doesn’t move at its own convenience, its duty is to stand its ground, but Olivier dashed through the corridors and past the stairs as if she was the last woman standing who could put out a terrible fire.

Packing took time, the flower girl must still have been in the room. In their room. She had to make it there now. She was already breathless and panting and doubting nothing in the world, because she had to do this, and she knew this was it. She would be tearing down every single wall she had built around her to remain strong, to remain neutral.

She would have to confess the truth.

But when she finally got the door open, the room was empty. And the desk was empty once again, a barren image for her barren life.

*I’m too late,* she realized. *I’m late for the one thing that mattered.*

She had already begun dragging herself back to the office when she rebelled.

She still had to try. She had to run after that car in the snow, she had to get it to stop. And she would not quit this until the engines had been shut down.

She grabbed the rusty handrail and rushed down the stairs. Only one thing mattered. Only one name. Olivier shouted it—she’d always been so good at shouting—because at this point she didn’t care. All that time repressing it and now it all came powering through her, past her, into the world.

*And so the wall ceases to look so vast and impregnable.*

She slammed her shoulder against the corner of the corridors she ran past. She ignored the soldiers she saw around. She had nothing but this chance. She wouldn’t stop. She couldn’t stop.

Despite her burning heart and aching limbs, despite the feeling that she’d never make it and that she’d been a fool to think she could outrun her own feelings, Olivier didn’t stop.

The floors flew by. All those many floors, and her legs hurt more and more. She could trip, now. And it would be game over.

Game over before it even started. Game over before she’d even admitted she was playing it.

Two more floors and she’d reach the ground floor, then risk it all in one final sprint to the car. She focused on that and ran faster.

And then she ran into something solid. Something that screamed.

Olivier almost fell; a hand that locked around her right wrist kept her standing. And she knew the touch of that skin.

Blue met brown for the second time that day.

She’d made it.

Blue and brown… Colors on opposite sides of things, colors that might blend and might somehow fit into the same portrait, but they would never be one and the same.
And yet, opposites sometimes collaborated. Winter and summer, and their offspring spring and autumn, the perfect balance of the two, either on one side of the spectrum of cold and warm.

No words were uttered. One glance that lasted ages was enough to communicate everything. All the remarks they’d bitten out of their mouths, all of those hidden looks neither had known how to interpret, that day on the floor of the gymnasium, the first blooms of spring they had enjoyed together, both in either side of the season and what it offered. Always in opposing teams, always competing over the empty space separating them.

Slowly, Olivier lifted her right hand, unable to look away, unable to breathe or think or analyze anything. She cupped Zinnia’s small face. Her jaw was so smooth and soft at touch, and her eyes… they drew her right in.

And who was Olivier to even dare try and avoid the calling of something that powerful?

She bent her neck down and she kissed her.

Olivier just kissed her. She found the girl’s waist with her other hand and gently pushed her against the nearest wall. Don’t leave, her touch whispered, sad, on Zinnia’s skin. Don’t leave me.

And Zinnia understood.

I never wanted to, she thought. But there wasn’t even room for thought. She felt she had been taken out of her body and was finally allowed to experience the whole world just by existing.

She existed to be held in the arms of this one woman.

Right now there were no labels. Zinnia was neither a civilian nor just a woman, and Olivier was no longer just a general and a soldier. Right now, there were only two women.

And when they separated and took the first full breath in a while, Zinnia remembered. Why she was here, what she was doing, and what she was running from.

No more.

“Why would you get me a way out if you didn’t want me to leave?” she muttered, both confused and delighted. Dazed. If she was walking in a dream, she didn’t want to ever wake up again. Not now, not ever. Some dreams were worth getting lost in.

“It wasn’t my choice to make.”

“I think you just made it anyway, general,” Zinnia mumbled, slowly raising herself up on her toes to put her lips on hers once more.

Chapter End Notes

*drops mic*
“Olivier. Call me Olivier.”

Zinnia didn’t reply. She couldn’t. She was glued to the dream she’d had since that day she’d walked past the river into this strange land full of even stranger people. And this wasn’t inside her head, only real when she was looking right at it and fog the second she turned away. This remained alive and out of her control even if her attention decided to drift somewhere else.

I’m kissing her.

She’s kissing me.

At first it was barely like acknowledging the elephant in the room, timidly petting its forehead with trembling fingers in case it wanted to stomp away in two trots.

Zinnia had her back against the wall and yet she’d never felt freer. Two wings wouldn’t have made her feel like she was floating more realistically than this. Two pairs of lips and a wall. And hands that never knew where to go.

Olivier’s hips pushed her against that solid vertical surface, her hair getting caught in the way, and Zinnia didn’t once think of moving away. A wall was fine, this place was fine. She could have been in the middle of a storm like the one they’d just lived through, and she wouldn’t have moved a inch. Something warm and heavy pulsed within her, and each pulsation was a blessing, a reminder. No dream would have managed to interweave detail into that feeling so accurately.

Zinnia’s chest heaved with air and emotion that filled cavities in her she didn’t know existed. This couldn’t be a dream or a fantasy or a mistake. None of those would ever replicate her breathing to that extent.

A woman and a soldier… she thought, finally daring to bring her hands up, tangling them in the mane of blond hair that tempted her—that had been tempting her since day one under the sun.

Olivier responded the same way, remembering she had hands, remembering the very daydreams she’d lost sleep for and how acutely the illusion of them had hurt for days and weeks and months. She remembered that day in the gymnasium where the simplest of touches, a corrective one, had sent shivers down her spine and thighs and made her spiral harder than any other time before.

She held Zinnia’s small frame in her arms, put her hands on the hips she hadn’t thought of touching in too long, and just let go. This wasn’t a playground, she wasn’t fifteen, and … she needed this. More than words could ever say.

It elicited a curious little sound from the girl—a sound coming from someone who was free, who didn’t have to bite her lip anymore and who now couldn’t. Because the two of them were intertwined in this intermittent form of a kiss that was no more just a piece of molten iron but the fire
that melts it instead.

Soon, it ceased to be an intermittent kiss, all carefulness and caution and a little bit of fear.

*A woman and a soldier...* Zinnia thought again, vaguely, like a faint memory in the back of her head. Was she the woman? Was she a soldier now? Had she fallen in? Would she ever want back out again?

Between a woman and a wall, would Zinnia ever want to leave?

Her hands, wiser than she was, wanted to return the favor of those palms at her hips. She found the hem of Olivier’s blue—ever so blue, delightfully blue—jacket and didn’t hesitate. Her fingers slithered under it, up, all the way up, at either side of her.

*Two women.*

“Fuck...” Olivier muttered mid-kiss.

“Nice word choice,” Zinnia whispered back, pulling her back in, tugging at that neck to bend down so she could reach. Their breaths overpowered them at this point. Any little pause in their motion was enough to take some air in, and it would last a lifetime.

When Zinnia’s fingers reached her chest, Olivier’s breath hitched between her lips, and her hands crisped on Zinnia’s hips. It was one thing to close your eyes in a shower and pretend the falling drops were company, and another one entirely to be here right now, after so many years of dryness, sharing a room with a waterfall.

Zinnia took advantage of this moment of weakness. Such a forbidden concept here on Briggs, yet useful. So very useful. She maneuvered Olivier away from that wall into a vacant room. Her hands would not move any further up in that corridor, not when anyone might come in and see. No one could see, no one could ever know just how far into the fort weakness had managed to trespass.

In the momentary pause between opening and closing the door once inside, they looked each other in the eye. A question that danced in midair.

“Now, what?” Zinnia finally asked it, panting a little now that she could. She didn’t know how this had happened, and she wouldn’t ask any other questions but this one. Now, what? What was about to happen? What did she want to happen?

Olivier made sure the door was locked before replying, breathy and... almost a different person in the dimness of this room. All the worry had disappeared from her face, and she seemed as carefree and young as she’d never truly been. Zinnia thought it was the light, and she didn’t really have much time to think or do any more.

The mountain came at her, the mountain at the border who hadn’t seen rain in decades, who hadn’t drunk in fifteen years. A solitary mountain meeting a slippery river.

And the river came to meet it, it leapt out of the floor to. Zinnia stood on tiptoe and did it gladly. She would have done anything to preserve the feeling of those lips on her own, the warmth of that body against hers. She never wanted it to end, she would have risked anything to have it again, to feel it again. And it hadn’t even ended yet. This was nostalgia for a memory that wasn’t yet fully formed.

They tangled around each other, and Zinnia walked backwards, moved by that glorious restless mountain, until she hit a chair and a table instead of a new, safer wall. And Zinnia sat down on it just from the shock and fear of falling when she was literally at her most vulnerable, and Olivier waited
all of half a second before she tried to sit on the girl’s lap. She lusted after that lap, with every single beat of the heart that in the eyes of everyone else in the world had never known love or kindness.

If they had seen, if they had had a way to know what was going through her mind right now… maybe they would have stopped calling her the Ice Queen. There was little about Olivier Armstrong right now that resembled a wall or crown of ice.

Nothing had ever made her lose her footing like this lap right in front of her was doing now.

“Wait,” Zinnia mumbled incoherently when she felt the thighs of the general rub against her own. “Wait, wait. You’re taller…”

Without a second of hesitation, Olivier directly picked her up from that chair as if she weighed the same as the oxygen they both breathed when they remembered to, and Zinnia wrapped her legs around the general’s waist, because she knew what was coming.

“Where was I?” Zinnia asked.

“Wherever you’d like.”

“Ah,” Zinnia said, slowly getting her hands right back where she wanted them. On that stomach she’d seen a thousand times and never had access to, that small crevice of the human body that wasn’t specially beautiful or seductive yet that drew her right in. It was close to everything else, the core of the human being she couldn’t believe she was with right now. Warm and steady and ever-moving, under the chest, a marble sculpture of Olivier’s breaths and heartbeat.

Olivier tensed her stomach at once when she felt Zinnia’s fingers there again, pressed against her black undershirt, and she didn’t lean in again to kiss her. She looked at her, brown eyes shining in the dimness, curious and thirsting. Olivier was such a goner already she could barely refrain from parting Zinnia’s lips with her tongue, but she did, she stood beneath her as a waystone, a curtain of hair separating them from the rest of the empty room.

Eventually, when a couple of buttons of her own uniform had already been undone, Olivier remembered she was allowed to do more than just be there, and she remembered she had done this very thing before, she knew how to do it, she just needed to step out of her head into the fray.

No, she immediately told herself off. This isn’t work. Don’t you dare think about work.

So she placed her hands on either of Zinnia’s thighs and the fabric covering them. The girl had somehow found the time to change into a dress to leave this place. A farewell dress turned into a gift in the very last second, when that act of leaving could not have been closer. Olivier began to skirt the parting gift up a little, her thumb almost touching flesh now. If only Zinnia hadn’t been wearing tights…

So much closer she would be now, to something she’d only dreamed about, never had. Touch. The real kind. Skin-to-skin. A human body to hide into, to pour into, to be depleted into.

Zinnia freed one of her own hands to help her push down the tights as her dress was slowly lifted more and more.

“Shit…” she let out as she bit her lip. No one had ever taken their time with her, not like this. It only made her love it all more. Anthony had always hurried it up, unable to wait a second more to have her in his arms. Olivier… Olivier enjoyed the wait. She sat there, legs spread slightly apart, hands doing all the work, and her face was so relaxed Zinnia might as well been dreaming indeed. She had never seen Olivier like this. Not once, not even when she was truly sleeping.
Slowly, Olivier raised her up and Zinnia leaned back on the table as Olivier kneeled on the floor, tall even then, and tugged at those damned tights to get them off.

“And you know what I said? ‘Madsen, you’re cute but really… do you have to ask me out in the fucking shower?’”

Zinnia literally squealed at the voice that was coming in their direction. This couldn’t be happening to her. No one could see the mess she’d let a general turn her into.

Without hesitation, Olivier covered the girl’s mouth with one hand, and she gently squeezed at the girl’s thigh to reassure her that everything would be okay, although her own heart was speeding up in her chest.

Don’t you dare come in here, you fools, she thought, hoping to death that they wouldn’t or they would run into a scene they would regret seeing for the rest of their lives. She would never let them walk into a crowded room again in fear they might spread gossip that, for once, would be well-founded.

“So what’d you say?”

“What’d you mean, what did I say? Yes, of course!”

The voices and the footsteps of their owners eventually walked past the room Olivier and Zinnia were in, still as statues. They saw their shadows eclipse whatever little light came from under the door and eventually the conversation faded away. They never got to hear about Madsen’s reaction.

Slowly, Olivier got her hand down from Zinnia’s mouth onto her other thigh. She planned to never move them from there. She had thigh access, she might as well build a house on them.

“Are they gone?” Zinnia muttered.

“Yeah.”

“Okay…”

Olivier tried to go back in, to return to the normal pace of things, but she immediately noticed how Zinnia seemed to have changed moods with this interruption, so she moved her hands away and pretended she needed them for something other than letting them hang at either side of her.

Zinnia cleared her throat, sensing that something had just snapped broken because of her. It was such a terrible feeling, to feel it and not understand why. All she’d done was… ask. All she’d done was worry, because this was fairly new if not new at all, not really, and she suspected Olivier herself wouldn’t highly appreciate this being shared to the rest of the world. Not today and probably not ever.

Life would still go on when they left this beautiful darkness, and it was a specific kind of life that didn’t allow for it. Beautiful had no practical use, all beauty faded, all beauty was eclipsed by something else.

Besides, Zinnia had been literally leaving that life, because it was the right thing, because she still wanted to protect herself against rejection. A rejection that was no more.

Life still goes on…

“Look, I… I don’t want to sound rude or anything,” she muttered, “because this is—I mean, I’ve
just… But there’s still a man down there waiting to take me to North City.”

Olivier was suddenly jolted back into her routine. Zinnia could see the small unobtrusive wrinkles returning to her face and her frown, back there again.

She wanted to reach out with the tips of her fingers and smooth them away. Go back to two seconds ago, please. I don’t like seeing you like this. I don’t like knowing there’s nothing I can do to stop you from worrying so hard.

How many senior officers in the whole of Amestris wouldn’t take their jobs seriously, delegating on others for everything and drinking themselves to sleep every night after having enjoyed their bountiful meals? And yet this one woman was one of the same men she was superior to.

“You can still leave, if that’s what you want,” Olivier replied, putting some distance between them as she stood up. She had made the choice to not meddle once, ten minutes ago she’d made the opposite, and now she only knew she didn’t want to be the sole selfish reason that kept the girl here. She needed to regain her comfort three or four paces between them, just to make sure, just to set some boundaries.

Zinnia shook her head energetically and Olivier’s entire plan, if she did have one, crumbled.

“I don’t want to now,” Zinnia replied softly. “I did want to, once, because…” She blushed at the thought of wording this truthfully or not. Did she have the guts to say ‘I wanted to leave because I thought what just happened would only ever happen in my head’? “Because I thought I was a bother around here. I thought you’d… never see me,” she finally admitted in a lower voice.

Olivier let all of her air out in relief.

“I thought you were leaving because you didn’t want to be seen.” Especially not by me. You hid, you kept hiding, and I no longer knew where to look for you. Or how. Tell me now, how?

“Everyone wants to be seen,” Zinnia replied, finding Olivier’s right hand to hold distractedly. It was the hand of a soldier, calloused from handling weapons and pens, strong. Hers. And maybe, just maybe, that was the most important adjective Zinnia could ever give it. “I know that much because… I know you liked me seeing you.”

Olivier’s brain short-circuited. She hadn’t been expecting that, not after the moment they’d just shared. Not ever, really. She’d sort of gotten used to the obvious fake anonymity of receiving writings about her. Words that now really did have a face, and one Olivier couldn’t pretend she’d never have to mind again.

She was suddenly hyperaware of all of those words. The good, the strange, and the worse.

Olivier’s frown deepened.

“Do you really think all that about me?” she asked. “You really think me that cold?’

“I didn’t just write about cold,” Zinnia said softly. “I wrote… about what I couldn’t say out loud to you.”

Olivier smirked. “Scared?’

Zinnia just shrugged. “Not more than you. I guess fair’s fair.”

Everything that had taken place in the past fifteen minutes was fair to her, a fair compensation for the
months of uncertainty.

“If you’re not leaving, then…” Olivier muttered, regaining some of the lost ground. She was a soldier, after all. All she ever did was try and scrape off some territory from the enemy. An enemy, a lover now. A lover… she repeated as she leaned in, closer and closer until the last vibrations of her vocal chords went right into Zinnia’s ears. Her neck would hurt the next morning, but she paid that thought no mind. She would deal with it when it came, not as the reason for it was right in her grasp. “D’you mind if I…?”

Finish what I started?

The awkwardness of leaving that room couldn’t be compared to anything else in the world. Every piece of clothing was back where it belonged, and however ruffled their hairs had gotten, a few quick adjustments before opening their door had fixed it for now. Nobody would be able to tell—at least at a glance—what had gone down in there.

Neither of the room’s previous occupants would have been able to, as well. They walked back into more than just a well-lit corridor. The reality of things they had interiorized in the past couple of months was waiting for them there. A reality they couldn’t ignore.

Once back under the light, Zinnia was still small and puny and belonging nowhere, and Olivier was someone who would always be out of her reach. A rich girl, a war hero, a general, a tough nut to crack. Zinnia had grown into a woman only because time had wanted it so, but she still came from humble origins and she hadn’t done anything note-worthy in her life. Even her writings were unoriginal, the only legacy she would ever have.

“So, um, I…” she said, unable to lock eyes with the same person she’d been mumbling incoherent words of praise to two minutes ago. “I should really … make some calls and… arrange for my stay.”

Arrange for my stay, Olivier’s brain repeated, unnecessarily emphasizing every word.

Staying. She was truly staying. Officially. It wasn’t an empty promise and yet Olivier fretted. She’d thought this would be permanent once, she couldn’t afford to hit the ground as hard as she had the day she’d found out she’d been wrong in assuming that.

“Are you staying because of… this?”

“I’m not… not leaving because of other things.”

Olivier’s eyebrow went up. “Is that a yes?”

“Look, I don’t know. I just suddenly don’t feel like braving up the world. But… that only stands if your invitation still does as well.”

“It does.”

Zinnia nodded quickly. “Okay, then that settles that, I’m just gonna…” She trailed off as she started walking away, picked up her luggage again, which she’d entirely forgotten about, and just exhaled for a couple of seconds. This was happening, then. Not a dream, not a fantasy. A real thing that had happened and wouldn’t vanish even if she willed it.

Now she had to deal with it, call North City, undo any preparation she’d done just… minutes ago—
mere minutes. Would Candie know?

“You’re… going in the opposite direction,” Olivier said, a few steps behind her.

Zinnia immediately changed courses as if she wasn’t mortified about this. Any of it. Pick an aspect of it and she would be biting down hard on her lip trying not to dwell on it.

“Yeah, right, so… phone.”

Olivier blinked as she watched Zinnia go.

She, too, would need to get started on some things. A driver drinking coffee somewhere on this floor, waiting for a passenger that was Olivier’s responsibility now. Or maybe… maybe more than a responsibility. Less than what her other responsibilities meant to her. This guest of hers wasn’t even hers, per se. Just… a companion. A partner of some kind. She would look for that defining word she was lacking later, she had a driver to talk to.

Dialing was the hardest. She knew the voice she was going to hear, and she could more or less imagine this would go down smoothly. But if Candie decided to channel her teasing spirits, Zinnia would be done for. After the day she was having, she felt shaky enough she might even have to sit down for a while to process it all in the measure that it needed to be processed.

She kissed me, Zinnia kept repeating inside her head. She ran to stop me and she kissed me. And I kissed her back. And now I can’t just pretend I didn’t.

Although, maybe to the woman who had just picked up her phone, yes she could.

“Who is it?” Candie asked.

Zinnia took a deep breath. It was now or never, and she really preferred not to bother the woman any more than she already had with all this business.

Zinnia had done so much lately in the name of running away from feelings and the reality of them, it embarrassed her.

“It’s… it’s me again.”

“Did something happen?” Candie said at once. “Are you okay?”

Something happened, alright, I just… am not sure what, exactly.

“No, no, I’m fine, I just… I don’t think I’m gonna need to stay at your place anymore.” Zinnia held her breath, expecting many things, none of them good. This was a capital-m mess. She was bailing on a friend, and even if the reasons behind that were cosmically agreeable, Zinnia didn’t mean to cause any more ruckus than she already had. She just wanted this over with at last, so she could finally sit and reassess the mess inside her own head.

“Oh, but… are we still seeing each other?”

“Probably, just… maybe that’s closest to spring than to now.”

Candie suddenly giggled.
“What in the hell is going on with you, huh?”

Zinnia laughed softly, she wasn’t too sure it was allowed. “It’s a long story.”

“You changed your mind pretty fast, that doesn’t sound like a long story to me.”

“It is, trust me.” Months and months and piles of words belonged to this story. If Zinnia tried to tell it in order, she didn’t think she ever could do it properly. “Let’s… just say I’m somewhere nice with nice people, and I thought I had to leave but maybe I don’t.”

Candie smiled over the phone and it was audible, like her cheek was pushing against the receiver as her lips curved.

“Things worked out, I see,” she commented.

“A little, yeah,” Zinnia admitted in a high-pitched chirp.

A brief silence followed in which Zinnia contemplated all the possible ways this would go, and she knew beforehand that Candie, while not entirely Buccaneer-like in this, would still not be gentle to her.

“Just tell that hurricane of a woman that she’ll respond to me if she does anything wrong by you,” Candie only said. She would have rubbed the ‘I told you so’ in Zinnia’s face, but that was a story for another time. They did have much to catch up about.

Shit.

Zinnia must have made a telling noise because Candie just straight up guffawed.

“My sight isn’t what it used to be, but some things are just too obvious to miss, kid,” she said for all explanation.

Zinnia looked around the room just to check nobody was capable of so much as intuiting what kind of conversation she was having. Miles was happily working on his things, as always. He sure had a gift for pretending not to notice what went on around him.

Turning her back on his just in case, he whispered to Candie: “Okay, yeah, but you can’t tell anyone about this.”

“Not a soul,” Candie promised, still chuckling to herself.

“Just, for the sake of conversation,” Zinnia said, cocking her head to the side. She couldn’t let this one thing go. “How—how long have you…?”

“Oh Zinnia, love…” And there she had her answer. And an extended answer: “You were a blushing little mess when she was around, and she was around quite a lot. It’s two plus two.”

“Shut up. I don’t wanna hear it,” Zinnia stuttered out. “I’ll meet with you in spring and you can make fun of me all you want, then. I’m sure you’ll enjoy the wait.”

“I most absolutely will.” Candie laughed again, then sighed. “Take care of yourself, and if you need me, just send for me. I’m sure your general won’t have much trouble doing that, hm?”

Your general. There was not a single universe out there in the fiction of things where Olivier would let anyone call her anybody’s general.
“I so hate you, boss,” Zinnia seethed. Then: “Stay safe and warm out there, will you?” It was still winter out there in the world, even if in her heart the flowers had just begun to bloom and the ice to melt. So much ice had been melted away in those hidden moments inside that room.

After that, Zinnia hang up the phone and just exhaled loudly. That was done, and she wouldn’t have to worry about it till next year. A beautiful chaos of things could have changed dramatically by then. She had nothing to worry about, right?

Miles chuckled softly in clear contradiction of the naiveté in her face and looked up at her.

“Just so you know, all conversations on that phone are recorded—”

“WHAT?” Zinnia shrieked.

Miles didn’t even bat an eye. In fact, he just kept grinning.

“—on account of the fact that they’re meant to be confidential.”

This was funny to him, of course. This was, in simple terms, the equivalent of a royal wedding everyone wanted to hear about. And Zinnia was wearing a gigantic ball gown with jewelry on it, a shining tiara, and a fucking arrow pointing at her saying ‘here be gossip’.

And, as a man who moved towards gossip the same way a moth flies towards warmth and light, Buccaneer chose that very moment of his grandiloquent existence to make the entrance of a lifetime, theater-style, as if everything had ended and Miles was the only source of any possible salvation.

“Miles, what the hell happened? What did I miss?” Buccaneer’s eyes went wide when he saw Zinnia standing there, behind his boss’s desk. “Holy shit. Kid, you’re not a ghost, are you?”

He stomped closer to pinch her cheeks just to make sure.

“Definitely not a ghost.” He turned to his right. “Miles? Care to explain?”

“Why is it that you’re always cluttering my office, Buccaneer? Don’t you have other more important places to be?” And thus Olivier made her entrance as well. She must have been right on his tail coming back up.

This all had just turned into a bigger chaos than it already was. Zinnia wasn’t too sure right now, after all, that this wasn’t a dream. Only dreams ever got to be this chaotic.

“Not today, I don’t” Buccaneer said. “I leave for the bathroom two seconds and now I’m lost.”

Olivier looked at Zinnia as if saying ‘I am so sorry everyone in this room is this big of an idiot’ and Zinnia just smiled and shrugged. She’d always found Buccaneer’s incessant need to meddle kind of charming, if obtrusive at times. Now she had no choice but to go with it or ask the ground to just swallow her.

Buccaneer squealed to himself when he caught that look between them and noticed the one missed button of Olivier’s usually impeccable state of dress.

“I knew it!”

“Knew what, exactly?” Olivier deadpanned. Today, she would not be giving any more shits. She was done. She planned to take the rest of the day off, cancel everything, just sit on her bed and reflect on her life’s choices. Especially the latter. And she would review as well if it was even normal
at this point to have two second-in-command who, instead of just following with their mouths shut, thought it was part of the job to scheme to make her life harder.

“I knew there was something there,” Buccaneer said.

“There certainly is something here right now, Captain.”

“What?”

“My fist in your face,” she said slowly, enunciating clearly as she stood on tiptoe to threaten him properly, in his personal space. She should have been muttering, especially when the omitted party to this conversation was right there, looking at them all like she’d never seen them before, but she couldn’t bring herself to. She knew, and more than knew, that mutters couldn’t placate him right now.

Buccaneer took a tiny step back to gain back his space. “No, thank you. I quite like my nose.”

“One more word and you’ll be saying goodbye to it, are we clear?”

“So, when’s the press conference, eh?”

“Shut up, Buccaneer,” Miles said, grinning.

Zinnia thought it wouldn’t be too much of a bad idea to just slowly slide all the way over where he was and let his bulky self shield her from whatever was happening.

“Yes, shut up. The both of you,” Olivier ordered.

“I didn’t… say anything yet,” Miles said.

“But you were going to.”

“If I get a say, and I’d like to,” Zinnia intervened, “it would help a lot if you took over my kitchen duties for the day, Buccaneer.”

Buccaneer made a confused bird face.

“There’s something there,” she said, repeating his own words back to him and feeling a tremendous wave of joy as she did, “and said something needs to be addressed. By me.”

Zinnia shot one quick look over at Olivier, hoping this wasn’t too bold and stupid, and so help her god she just really wanted this big idiot to go back to whatever he was doing today.

“You’re not leaving?” he asked.

“Nope.”

Buccaneer just went for it and tried to hug the two of them even though they were standing a few steps away from each other.

Olivier lifted one index finger to make him stop.

“Don’t you even think about it.”

“Aw.”
“I’m serious.”

Momentarily placated by the only person who could, Buccaneer smiled at the two of them.

“In that case, I will leave any further investigating to Miles, right, bud?”

“I’m busy…” Miles mumbled in his direction. He wasn’t, but still.

Buccaneer grinned at them one last time and just left. Zinnia let out all of her air at once, like something had just stepped off of her chest.

“I’m going to go … unpack.”

And she would sure as hell not do so slowly. She had a lot to ponder.

She took one inquisitive look at Olivier, who just nodded.

“I’ll help you shortly. There’s some things I need to sort out first.”

Like her mind.

Miles pretended not to hear any of it, but really… all he could think about was how extraordinary it was that Olivier was offering to help the girl to unpack. Of all the excuses in the world she could have given.

Someone needed to teach this woman the ways of being subtle, she had learned all of the wrong things from Buccaneer. Or maybe it just wasn’t in Olivier’s nature to be subtle, even in matters like this one.

Zinnia sat on the bed, surrounded by clothes she hadn’t worn in months. Clothes that weren’t her own but were, in a way. She just missed the blue. She missed the spaces between the flowery dresses that matched Central’s vibe and the blue she’d adopted as her own because she’d wanted so hard to fit in.

She had wanted to blend in that hard, after all, to not be seen at the same time that she desperately craved for someone to notice her.

Olivier walked in and saw her. Saw her for who she was, behind all the layers she put up for the world to see. She was just a girl, old enough to be more than just that, and young enough that the weight of life still felt too complex for her shoulders.

“Maybe just use the drawers?” Olivier said, closing the door behind her—softly, so it wouldn’t slam. So no one could tell there was a conversation to be had in this room. She didn’t want to cause a commotion of any kind with this, enough had already gone down because of her lack of discretion and Buccaneer’s splendid work at matchmaking.

Zinnia looked up when the door closed, and Olivier couldn’t help but notice the fear in her face. It scared her, too. One of them would have to be the stable, rational mind in the discussion that needed to be had, and Olivier hadn’t been counting on her own brain to remain calm for much of that.

She had crossed lines today, not just general ones but the lines she’d set for herself, all those years ago when she’d first received notice that she was to march north. Today, she’d… gotten involved. Too involved. And then… the involvement had shifted forms so quickly, without her even realizing
And it hadn’t been hard only for her. It couldn’t have been. Both sides at a war took losses, after all. The flower girl was covered in fabrics with her flowers and her personal belongings, all wrinkled in her lap and arms. She had lost something too. Something more than just calmness.

“Maybe not,” Olivier added, mostly to herself. They would deal with the literal mess in the room later. First things first, she guessed. A priority that she had put off dealing with for too long.

She stood there, unsure of where to sit, or if she even should. Perhaps the girl might appreciate the distance right now. But Olivier had no way to know, foreign feelings seemed as slippery to her as military terminology to any civilian.

Zinnia didn’t take her eyes off of her. She’d tried to manage the art of looking away for months. In the sun or in the snow, it never mattered to her, Zinnia had always known she wasn’t allowed to look at Olivier. No one was, least of all her.

And it should have been mutual, their paths should have diverged so very long ago. In that town, before the migration. Zinnia should have stayed in Central with her family, to build the life they expected of her—the life she still expected of herself—but she hadn’t. She had come back here, to a land with many names, none of them kind. Why?

The reason was standing right in front of her. And Zinnia had never noticed it as accurately as now. She’d never been able to indulge in it like this before.

“You stopped me,” Zinnia said. Twice. When Olivier hadn’t even been there, when Zinnia herself hadn’t known that the force stopping her had a name. And now, when that force had manifested at last. At long, long last.

“Sort of.”

“No,” Zinnia said, shaking her head. There had been nothing in that… particular contact they’d shared that said ‘don’t go, but only a little’. “You stopped me. Functionally.”

“Impulsively.”

“But it worked,” Zinnia insisted. She threw her hands up in the air only to drop them back on her lap, fingers curling on one of her dresses. “That’s what I mean. I… should have left, but I didn’t.”

Olivier just stood there and Zinnia kept staring. Apparently, today could still get a little worse. She wasn’t sure which of the two of them wanted to run faster out of there.

And still, Zinnia asked:

“Would you sit down with me?”

Olivier did so with an exasperated sigh.

“It was every intention of mine to stop you, but…” she said. “You’re free to go. I won’t say it again, I’ll just assume you know. You’ve always been free to. I’m not here to control which rights you have and which you don’t.”

“Not everyone would have made me turn back, today. It would have taken more than just—“ A kiss. She stopped herself right before she said it. She didn’t think she could say it. “Besides, we’re different, you and I. I’m not… like you. I don’t see how we could—” She bit her lip, she was
making horrible assumptions and she should fix that before her sentence was over: “—if you still wanted to, I mean…”

Olivier interrupted her before she got her thoughts even more tangled up. Of course they were different. In fact, Olivier had never met someone as different from her. All the people in her life for the past fifteen years had been soldiers, superiors, and enemies. Zinnia was neither. Once, perhaps, a nuisance. Perhaps, always, someone she didn’t know how not to control.

“Do you want… today to happen again?” she simply asked. The rest would follow, she could only hope. First, the basics, then they would see.

Running, not running, embarrassment, delight, then more embarrassment, then running back to a familiar room so she could cry in peace. Zinnia had no doubts about it: “Fuck, no.”

“The… less abhorrent parts of it,” Olivier clarified.

“Oh.” Zinnia looked away. It had definitely not been abhorrent. It had been… nice. So very nice. For a writer, she was running out of words to describe things. Olivier had that effect on her, all her words ran and ran and she had to run after them to pick them up before they left her completely.

She had seemed to realize what the subtext was on this. Do you want to keep doing what we’ve done? Do you want what you’ve been longing for or should it stay a dream forever?

“You… scare me,” Zinnia finally offered in a mutter, eyes away from Olivier’s. “What you could do to me scares me.”

“It’s the coat,” Olivier said, smiling lopsidedly.

Zinnia laughed at that. “Yeah, that too.”

“I’m not offering this to you out of… a level head. You don’t know the power you could have. The power you do have. On me.” And I’m not about to tell you myself, the extent of that power.

“Well, maybe I do know a little,” Zinnia said. She curved her lips into a sad smile and looked Olivier in the eye. “I liked seeing you short-circuit. At first, anyway.”

And didn’t that feel far away…

“Just answer me something honestly,” Olivier said. Honesty before all. Truth and simplicity, hand in hand. “Do you or do you not want to do it again?”

Zinnia gulped audibly.

“Yes,” she said without further hesitation.

Yes. She had just said yes, or Olivier had misheard.

“Do you?” Zinnia asked in return.

Olivier just nodded. She wasn’t in the right state of mind to answer that in words. That dark room had reminded her what she had been missing, and what she now had just in reach of her fingers. Quite literally, in fact. They sat on the same bed, inches apart, and if she shifted just a little, she could hold it in her hand.

Zinnia just tightened her grip on whatever dress of hers she had on her lap.
“It really has been… a long time since the last time,” Olivier admitted. An oddity. Confessing to this was even odder, somehow. It was a fact that she had long ago lost all practice at anything remotely different from platonic, and she had accepted that for what it was.

“Me too,” Zinnia muttered wetly. She didn’t sound like she was on the brink of tears, but maybe she was close. She lifted her head to look Olivier in the eye again, and when she smiled now it wasn’t sad or doubtful. “But I’ve chosen to stay. And that overpowers everything else. Giving it one try won’t hurt me.” *Even if it might overpower me instead.* She gave a cute shrug. “I mean, we’re literally at the end of the world. What could go wrong?”

“Many things,” Olivier stated matter-of-factly.

So many things. Everything.

“But most of them are not even related to… this,” Zinnia pointed out. There was a war on the way, a winter to survive, and soldiers to keep in check. It was a relief to know that if things did crumble, they would do so outside of their control.

“This?” Olivier repeated.

“This.” Zinnia confirmed. This, indeed.

“This, what?” Olivier dared to challenge her. She needed to hear it too. It might snap her out of whatever had possessed her today. It might remind her of who she was, a soldier who stopped at nothing, who feared nothing, whose feelings had been frozen a long, long time ago and which were finally beginning to thaw just enough to let the light in.

Ice was so opaque sometimes…

“This beginning.” Zinnia said, cleanly.

And Olivier thought it proper.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a funny story: I didn’t plan to post this chapter today. It’s been a reality for me since September, but recently when I was revising chapter 28 and the like I started counting days and realized that the biggest scene between our two protagonists was going to be uploaded precisely on Valentine’s Day. Needless to say I fangirled extra hard with myself for that stroke of … luck? XD and I’ve been evilly waiting for today to make an appearance in Amestris all Cupid-style, aggressively throwing confetti all over Briggs.

Anyway, I hope you’re having a fantastic day out there regardless of your sentimental situations, and I send you all a little bit of love from my corner of the world <3

This chapter, and the one before it, are after all hymns to all the love I have received from you, all those squeals about slow burn and will-they-won't-they, and of course they're an hymn to the fucking love story that has existed in my head since I started watching FMAB and that now, little by little, gets to exist outside of it too.

Thank you for reading!
They folded clothes together for a while, put them in drawers and left them there. They would have been empty, if Zinnia hadn’t made use of them. This room, without her, would have returned to its original state. Devoid of life, only ever given a glimpse of it when Olivier went to sleep very late at night.

It was a pleasant routine, unpacking, although silent. Zinnia had no idea what she should bring up in conversation. Sometimes speaking made it worse, and if she made ‘today’ any worse, she’d end up crying in a corner when no one could see her. And she shared a room, which made it a little harder than usual to not be seen.

When she was done, Zinnia sighed. Now that her hands were no longer busy with such a mindless task, she just needed to figure out how to deal with this. A beginning, alright. And beginnings meant her foresight was crippled and she just had to trust whatever was coming would be something survivable by her standards.

“All done?”

Zinnia nodded.

“I just need to get my uniform back from the laundry room.”

Olivier frowned. “Do you still want to wear it?”

She had made certain assumptions that this change in both their lives entailed more than the change itself but everything surrounding it. Their routines, their schedules, their duties. She no longer felt obliged to include Zinnia in the fort’s daily life in order to suppress certain things. They were… out in the open now, at least to the one person who should know about them.

“I wouldn’t want to be the … odd one out,” Zinnia said. *Especially now.* Because, realistically, how long did a thing like this last in the shadows, with Miles and Buccaneer lurking around?

“You have all these clothes and you won’t wear them?”

Zinnia finally closed the drawer, fingers hovering over the handle for one second longer than she had to. She looked Olivier in the eye.

“Do you … want me to wear them?” she said.

Olivier merely shrugged. “They’re *your* clothes.”

It truly wasn’t any of her business what Zinnia decided to do about that. She couldn’t care in the slightest, and… besides, wearing dresses in winter couldn’t amount to be a good thing.

She moved towards the door. If she stayed one minute longer she would definitely send that conclusion she’d come to to hell and definitely advise her to go with her normal clothes. There were already too many uniforms in this place.

“I need to go,” Olivier said. *To do what?* To be honest, she didn’t really think she had it in her to
focus on work today, on anything that wasn’t this morning and everything that had led to it. She couldn’t wait for night to fall so she could scurry out of her office and just… feel somewhere safe and secluded where her mind would be the only one to judge her.

“I can move rooms if that’s…” came the muffled voice of the flower girl from behind her. Olivier turned around slowly and saw her there, demure and tiny, like the guest she’d been time ago and grown out of. Olivier had, unwillingly, helped bring that back into her own room, and she didn’t want it to be back. She missed the Zinnia who would finish the sentence at once if only to spite her, although this was the farthest thing from spite. “I was thinking maybe you would be more comfortable that way.”

“You’re fine where you are,” Olivier said. “Unless you don’t want to be.”

And the backlash of hearing herself say that was enough to practically rush out of the room and put out a fire that only burned within her.

Zinnia just stared.

And she did want to be here. Of course she did. But that didn’t make it any easier, putting books back up on those shelves, as if they were hers. They were a loan. And a loan a second time around felt like too much of a kindness, a kindness from someone not prone to them.

The remainder of the day took its sweet time to arrive, as if the world had slowed down and minutes lasted hours. They sat at opposite floors of the fort, apart and not really knowing what they were doing about it. One talk didn’t fix it all, none of this really fixed it. It had just… at least put them on the same page about things, without having really named the things they wanted.

Maybe they would, eventually, when the shock faded.

To be honest, Zinnia might have really benefited from not sharing a room tonight, of all nights. When it got dark in and out, when she came in after working all day and they were both alone. Anything could happen, and a very specific type of ‘anything’ without a little bit of probing around to see what the hell was going to happen, of all.

“I’m a fucking idiot,” Zinnia told herself. It’s not like she wasn’t … curious about baring that tall woman the same way Zinnia had been bared earlier. But she still needed reassurance about so many things her head swirled around and around just by thinking about all the answers she didn’t have.

When it was time for lunch, Zinnia made sure to grab the coat that she hadn’t returned (and wasn’t planning to) and to appear in the kitchens a good half an hour later than her usual time.

She wasn’t ready to face the prying eyes she surely would there. Buccaneer wouldn’t wait much to curl around her and just ask, without scruples or any hint at why he should have them. Deep down, she knew his intervention had only sped things up. What needed to be there had already been, and he had been the first to spot it. Zinnia didn’t want to think about what might have happened after she’d left, if Olivier would have had to face a very red-in-the-face Buccaneer, swearing to all the gods he knew that she’d just missed something very important when she’d most needed to be alert and logical.

And maybe because Zinnia was shying away from it, what she was trying to avoid was the first thing she met when she meant to get into that kitchen, get something quick to eat and disappear into the falling night: Buccaneer surrounded by his clique.

Zinnia blushed to the root of her hair and looked down, thinking that maybe he wouldn’t notice her if
she did.

“Well, well, well, look who’s here,” he said, wrapping a humongous arm around her shoulders.

“A very hungry gal,” she said.

“Who can probably spare a few seconds of her free time to tell us some details, eh?”

She drew the line right here and glared at him in a way she would have never dared to before. It was normal for him and the rest to be curious and to gossip, because they had no other glimpse into a normal life outside of that, but to project into it this hard wasn’t pleasant for her, and she imagined Olivier would appreciate some more discretion as well. If this landed in the wrong ears, her reputation might suffer, and Zinnia would blame herself for it for the rest of her days.

She wouldn’t be the one to make the wall of Amestris crumble.

“My life isn’t for fucking consumption, Buccaneer,” Zinnia said calmly. “Good day.”

She broke free, pushing past the gathering of men, and sat down at the furthest empty table she found to eat. The sooner this day ended, the more easily she would breathe.

She just needed rest and space to think about this. She just needed a bit more of time as well to process it all. Now, she had a prospect of something in the works, and a few hundred men who appeared to be most interested in how that turned out.

And, surprisingly, she wanted to be able to focus on the first, rather than the latter. But if they gave her no choice, she wouldn’t play coy either. A winter romance could sure wait until she’d screamed their heads off, and she had enough of a cordial friendship going on with Buccaneer to do that now.

Later, she returned to her empty room and found a bit of that space she was looking for. Unfortunately, having that didn’t mean her mind would be easily made up as to other things.

“Back already?” Miles’s kind words welcomed her in, like no time had passed and this was just another normal day in their normal lives. Miles had been her health compass for so long, even when she’d insisted she didn’t need such a thing, she didn’t find it strange he was asking now this normally about something not normal at all.

Olivier hung her coat on her chair and sat down.

“Back for good, yes.”

Miles let her acclimate for a couple of seconds. It had been such an ecstatic day, she needed it. Then, he asked quietly:

“How is she?”

“Shaking like a leaf.”

Miles smiled. “And how are you?”

Olivier looked at her messy desk to avoid answering truthfully. “I’m fine.”

“Was I right, then, General?” Miles asked, and not because he wanted another medal or to take all
the credit for something that didn’t affect him. He sounded genuinely interested in what she might have to say, no matter what.

“About regretting it if I didn’t do it…” she said. Then she sighed. “We will see. We will just… see.”

He allowed himself a tiny smirk. “I don’t think that woman’s the only one shaking like a leaf today.”

“No, she wouldn’t be, would she?”

Olivier had every reason to want to quit everything and just hide until she knew how to control this. A beginning, Zinnia had called it. Beginnings were the most terrifying force on the planet, because they never let you in on what was coming at you as soon as the beginning itself was over. And this beginning didn’t just affect her, after all.

“Miles, I’m going to have to ask you to keep out of it now. You and the captain, despite my insistence, have continued with something that you shouldn’t—and you’ve been successful. But your involvement needs to end here, do I make myself understood?”

“Yes, sir.” He nodded. “It shouldn’t have happened before, either.”

“No,” Olivier agreed. “But now… wherever I end up, it’s up to me. I don’t want her to stay because she thinks she has to, because you’ve made her think she’ll be happier, safer here than any other place. She won’t.”

Miles didn’t hesitate before he replied:

“I’ll do my best, but you know Buccaneer. He’ll take a little more convincing.”

“I trust you’ll manage.” she smiled placidly back at him.

“Yes, and if you need anything else, I—”

“I know,” she cut him off before he finished that sentence. She didn’t think she could handle it. Too mushy for her, for this day. Finally, she’d dared to fire the shots. Now she needed to just… be okay with the choices she’d made—been, at times, helped to make.

What she was going to do, or deciding she would eventually do, nobody could help her with. Or no one should.

Luckily for her, Miles was a reasonable man, no matter if sometimes he let Buccaneer drag him into morally questionable endeavors, and he let her have some quiet. They worked in silence throughout the entire day, even after lunch break, and she couldn’t have felt more grateful for that than she did.

She needed to be alone in her own head, to figure some things out, and if he’d brought up something to talk about to pass the time or lectured her on how much she worked, that wouldn’t have been possible.

Olivier and the flower girl had… done something she couldn’t forgive or forget. They had broken the rules. And she’d liked it, and if they had agreed on anything, they had agreed that they both had liked it enough to do it again. But under whose terms? And for how long?

She tried to think of it as simply as possible, yet every time she came across the word ‘girlfriend’ in her mind, she panicked. She had been twenty the last time she’d been well-versed on the world of girlfriends and relationships and—god forbid—love.
“… too old for that now,” she muttered to herself.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” she quickly said to keep Miles off of it. He was younger, he might still remember how to do these things. And she would rather seal her lips together than ask him for help.

Dates couldn’t be that complicated. Feelings shouldn’t be that complicated. She’d had to plan around days with a higher level of difficulty, and she’d lived through them. She could do this, if she approached it correctly, if she came up with the right strategies.

She’d kept Drachma away twice now. With her honor and pride at stake, she would do this. She just needed a little time to think about it, and maybe a little more than just a little.

On her way to dinner, several hours later, she already had a plan. A few plans, in case the first few didn’t work. She would ignore the panic and push past it, the same way she’d been taught to do at the academy.

*Your fear will only get you killed if that’s what you choose to follow instead of whoever’s in charge of your sorry little asses,* they’d told her and the rest of her year.

She was in charge of many more asses now aside from her own. That responsibility meant that any fear she might feel was irrelevant, she had to make sure her voice was heard much more clearly than the voice of fear. The last thing the fort needed was to get lost in that of her own.

Olivier wanted to follow something else, something that didn’t stem from panic or led to hysteria and feelings. She wanted to follow her common sense and establish some basic ground to work from. Fort Briggs hadn’t always stood proud as a wall, so very little forts in the whole of Amestris had ever gotten to that level. Most were built as four-story buildings in the middle of whatever grounds they were on, big enough to host many numbers and defendable by any standards, always aimed to be a place from where attackers marched forward. Briggs was famous because it kept intruders away, instead of conquering more ground every decade and expanding the border.

“Good night, General,” Miles told Olivier when they both exited the office. He usually got down to the kitchens at a different time than her, leaving her to work on whatever was left at that hour. Sometimes, if he’d managed to convince her to quit overworking herself, it made sense, then, to walk there together. But today of all days was a perfect chance for him to go his own way.

Whether he was waiting for her to get to the kitchens first or he had somewhere else to go, she didn’t know and she didn’t plan on sticking around long enough to find out.

Tonight… she would sit down again on her bed and she would talk about things, even if it hurt to do so. Because it needed to be done. She needed Zinnia to know, the same way she hadn’t let Ianthe know. She would do better this time, she owed it to herself.

A little food would do her good, and if she managed to distract herself from so much planning, then maybe she would even find the miraculous lost idea that would drastically help her case. Because of the late hours there wouldn’t be many people down there; she hoped Miles would have the decency to sit far away from her and not mention *anything* in public.

Someone bumped against her shoulder on the way down the stairs.

“Shit, sorry.”

Olivier wasn’t even going to say anything, but then she realized who it was and she had to make an
effort to not look surprised—and glad to be bumping into her again, twice in the same day. At least now neither were in a hurry.

“Back for more?” Olivier said.

“I could ask you the same.”

Ah, but they both knew Zinnia would never ask that with all these people around them, she wasn’t dead enough inside for that yet. Olivier risked playing around with words and intonations because it had been a long time since she’d felt she had anything to lose. Usually, she wouldn’t mean that kind of question, and that always made it so much easier to ask them now that she did.

They kept walking.

“Are you… especially hungry?” Olivier asked. She hadn’t actually planned to say any of this until it had been a few days and they had talked more and some of the initial uncertainty had blurred away, but the girl was making obvious efforts to prolong this conversation and Olivier wasn’t going to be the one to call her out on that when she was about to do the very same herself.

“No, should I be?”

Olivier made a face, regretting this instantly. She wasn’t ready to do this right now, she’d hoped that Zinnia would say yes and then Olivier could have waited until after what promised to be an awkward dinner. This wasn’t going according to plan, and even if she should know how to handle it, suddenly all she knew was that improvising wasn’t her forte. She had captured people and driven them to death slowly, without having the slightest clue where she would be getting with that. But right now she definitely was not the queen of improvisation.

“Perhaps it’s better if you just eat first.”

“Better for what?” Zinnia asked.

And Olivier, who saw what nobody else could, had failed to see this question coming. And, thus, she had no clue what to say that would sound witty and that would help her not ruin things a little too early.

“I want you to see something,” she admitted, her voice a little less commanding than usual.

And Zinnia’s body jolted as if someone had just thrown something very heavy at her face. Her hand immediately reached for the handrail and her foot failed to meet the next step on the stairs. Olivier stopped as well, not realizing the few men who were grumpily complaining about them clogging the way down.

She was too lost in the constellations of brown standing right beside her to notice.

“I don’t mind eating later, to be honest,” Zinnia said.

“Then… Is it okay if we stray from the normal course of things?”

Now, Zinnia was positively intrigued. That particular way of phrasing it could only be referring to one thing.

Abruptly, they turned against the crowd to find an unoccupied elevator. Zinnia’s heart pounded against her ribs. She had no idea what was going on but her brain was already sending her less and less mild suggestions about what it could be. She wasn’t anywhere near ready to… jump to certain
things at the moment. She’d had more than enough this morning and she knew *that* alone would take a few days to fully process.

She could still see herself crying in a corner later tonight.

“What exactly is it that I … need to see?” she managed to ask in a small voice. Once inside the elevator, she made sure to stay a good couple of inches away. If she didn’t, she was sure they wouldn’t be getting back to the real world again in a while. Long enough for people to complain about a ‘malfunctioning’ elevator.

“You really don’t need to see it,” Olivier said, amused. “But you might like it. I know I do.”

“Oh…” Zinnia said. Now she was sure there would be no need to paralyze the normal functioning of the elevators, at least for the moment being. Where were they even going that they’d moved past the usual range of floors Zinnia was used to?

Then—

*Winter. The promise of winter.*

Olivier was taking her to the top of the wall.

When the doors of the elevator opened and they walked into the fresh fallen snow, Zinnia’s jaw fell. She could feel it, the wind in her face and the chill in her bones that she knew well enough from the time she’d spent patrolling. Winter at its best, a gentle winter now that the storm was over and their hearts were all in the right places.

“Fucking freezing,” she said with a grin starting to spread all over her face.

“As promised,” Olivier replied gently.

Zinnia nodded. “I remember.”

And there was a smile there, for a second. A shared smile.

Zinnia walked closer to the edge of the wall, the final step between solid concrete and falling down to meet the cold, icy ground. There was no handrail there, and she wasn’t at all taken aback by that. If anything, she’d sort of expected it.

“Careful,” Olivier said, seeing what she was doing. “It’s slippery.”

Zinnia said nothing. She just… took it all in. The light was fading around them, graying and yellowing and each second a bit darker. Night was falling on the valley. If Iver had been active, she might have been able to see the lights switched on in the distance. For now, though, all winter had to offer her were the mountains in all of their splendor, the cascades of gray and white, all rock and snow.

And the woman standing behind her.

Winter had brought her here as well, a different winter than the one spreading before the two of them.

“Earlier today,” Zinnia said, as she realized that it indeed had been that very morning, “I was sad that I’d never really… see this.”

“It’s not at its most impressive,” Olivier said, matter-of-factly, hands behind her back. “Most people
prefer to see it at sunrise.”

Zinnia turned around to look at her, and all Olivier perceived was the song of the winter she had always loved in the brown hair of the woman standing right in front of her.

“I guess I’ll have to ask Miles to make room for me to get a sunrise patrol.”

“I’m sure he’ll be delighted to.”

Zinnia sighed and smiled.

“Now, why am I really here?” she asked.

I’m scared, I’m scared I’ll let you go because I don’t know how to do anything else. That’s all I’ve ever done, pushing people away to keep them safe. Olivier had no answer, except the one she could not give.

“Honesty,” she replied instead, softly.

“Oh, are you making me swear a vow or something? Should I get a tattoo with your name?”

In any other moment, Olivier would have appreciated the biting remark because it was good, but right now she was two steps away from losing her mind. She had absolutely no idea how to deal with the … emotional part of this. Feelings weren’t meant to be her stepping stone, they’d never been. Ianthe had always taken care of it, her last and only real relationship. She’d had other partners, sporadic and wonderful, but only in bed. And never mimicking Ianthe’s companionship. Now she was walking into grounds she had no control over or knowledge about.

“What do you want from me?” Olivier asked.

“What do you want to give me?” Zinnia asked in return.

Anything. Everything. Can that be?

“Whatever you want.”

“Well, that’s not very practical. We could spend a week here, because I won’t take anything you don’t want to give, and you won’t give anything I don’t want to take. Loopy, if you ask me.” Zinnia rambled and rambled and rambled. Words took over when she couldn’t even think straight. What do I want, she asked me. As if I have ever, at any point of my life, known what I wanted.

Although, perhaps, now it would be a little easier to pinpoint.

Blue on blue, yellow and pink, and … body heat. A person to grow closer to, to giggle with in a gymnasium when it could not have been less appropriate for her to.

Olivier just shrugged. “I have time.”

“What’s going on?” Zinnia asked. “Exactly, I mean. Because I have a feeling this is not about… the room.” The room where I felt you closer than I ever have, the room that I left and immediately felt the closeness disappear.

“It’s not about rooms, no,” Olivier said. She bit her lip. Should she just say it? Could she, even? “It’s about—” Oh, fuck, there she went. “It’s about … whether this is going to be about sex or… not.”

Zinnia immediately covered her face with her hands, blushing harder than the cold could possibly
make her, and she actually spun around. She couldn’t face another human being right now.

“I’m serious,” Olivier said, not as firmly as she’d hoped to.

“No, I know, just…” Zinnia squealed. “Why did you have to be so direct?”

“What? Was I supposed to toe around that for weeks?” Olivier sounded mildly panicky, only ever matched by Zinnia’s own panicking.

“Yes! No. I don’t know!”

“Is there more to it, then?”

Zinnia gave another squeal. She finally dared to turn around again and peek between her slightly less tightly pressed together fingers.

“… yes,” she replied, and Olivier’s chest heaved out easily at long, long last.

“Okay,” Olivier said. She could work with that. She could gladly work with that.

“Okay? What’d you mean, okay? I just told you my… thing. It’s your turn!”

Olivier couldn’t do anything but repress an urge to smile stupidly. She could not believe she was having this conversation. Her plan had comprised a little moment around the impressive sights and maybe a conversation, certainly not this one.

“Fine,” she conceded in the end, “but you have to look at me.”

Zinnia shook her head. “Keep dreaming.”

“Just look at me and then I will tell you.”

“I think I’m good just with hearing you, thanks.”

“Don’t be childish.”

“Remember that whole bit I said about being scared? Well, I’m scared right now too.”

“Zinnia,” Olivier said, and Zinnia positively felt her entire soul ascend. Her name, uttered by that one person who had power over it. Olivier could command the galaxies in Zinnia just by saying it, when she wanted and how she wanted it. And the worst part was that… Olivier was already so used to power that she would either think this one puny or she would know exactly what to do with her. Either way, Zinnia’s heart began to flutter in thick anticipation. “Look at me.”

*When a general orders, you follow. And you follow because you believe. So Zinnia did. She slowly removed her hands form her face and tried not to panic visibly.*

“Looking,” she muttered. Maybe it was the cold, finally filtered through to her. “Now just break it to me.” *Tell me it’s just sex for you. I might still leave, after that. Break my heart.*

What was another crack in that heart who had already taken months and months of silence?

“Is there more?” Olivier wondered aloud. She actually chuckled feebly, after that. It felt like such a silly question after so long. But she had to answer it, and she had to do it now. No matter how scared it made her feel. “Yes. Yes, there is.”
“Oh,” Zinnia said in surprise. “Oh…”

“Now,” Olivier said, gaining some composure. “What do you want from me?”

And right now Zinnia did take that seriously. They were on the same page, more or less seeking the same from one another. Now it was time to name the limits, to figure out the concrete aspects of it, to pinpoint where this was going to go, if it was indeed going anywhere.

“Hug me,” she asked.

“What?” There went the short-circuiting.

“What I want from you right now… is a hug. Do you feel like you are up for giving me that?”

“I’d originally asked that so we could—” Olivier stopped herself. It didn’t matter. It was cold and it was winter and they were both exhausted. “Yes, I am up for that.”

As if this was an office meeting somewhere where Olivier still remembered the importance of paperwork.

“Oh,” Zinnia muttered and she slowly walked up to her. She had no idea how to approach this. How long ago had she last hugged someone? Back home, maybe? Anthony, who always craved to touch her last and remember her by that? Touches who didn’t matter to her as much as this one, because it was, for once, what she needed, what she wanted, and what she knew how to want.

_The Mountain at the Border_, Zinnia thought. Every time they stood this close, every time they would be alone now, Zinnia still held her breath for a moment as she processed how small she was right next to Olivier. Not just shorter, but small.

Tentatively, shaking a little—and not just because of the weather—, she put her hands around the general’s waist and pulled her closer, and then she felt Olivier’s arms doing the same with her, wrapping around her shoulders.

“What do you want from me?” Zinnia asked in a very thin voice.

Olivier gently brought a hand up to the back of Zinnia’s neck.

“Your patience,” she finally replied. “I’m not very good at this. Do you think you’re up for that?”

“I have nothing but time, … Olivier.”

Getting back to the room proved itself a daunting task. Winter did sing a wonderful song, gentle and mysterious like the melody a siren lures sailors in with. Without the danger of freezing to death somewhere and welcomed in by the promise of a bed and three meals a day, winter didn’t look menacing at all. It actually appeared a little like it did in stories, a character with its own personality and role to play. In this case, it wasn’t there to threaten them but to blow at their backs until their eyes met.

They had dinner together that night under the very prying gaze of Buccaneer, who at least had enough decency left in him to just make all his inappropriate comments to a mortified-looking Miles. If this was going to be her life now, Olivier thought, just dinners and nights and Miles handling the worst that came with it, then she could get used to it.
Once she learned how to do it. Because she had to learn how to do it. She couldn’t keep having ideas for stolen moments as if they were war strategies written on a worn notebook and delivered as precisely as one could. This wasn’t a war.

This was the part of her life that stood the furthest away from the war that was coming at her, full steam ahead.

The dreaded moment of the day came not longer after that dinner. They let the kitchens get empty, dragging their last bites of their meals until they were alone and only a third of the lights of the room were on.

They hadn’t spoken much after that hug on top of the wall. Olivier had little to draw from in order to find a suitable way to speak. What would she even talk about? Weather, work, war. Little else. And she didn’t usually engage in personal information interchanges until much later, when it became a necessity.

Silence suited the two of them better, for now.

Then, they eventually had to get up, clean their plates, and turn off all the lights before heading upstairs. Zinnia kept walking faster and faster, as if wishing she could just get there and get on with it, and once she got the door to the room open, it took her little more than three seconds to get rid of her coat and uniform, don her more comfortable pieces of clothing and prepare her mat on the floor.

“What are you doing?” Olivier asked her, raising an eyebrow. She had only had time to remove her coat and her jacket, not so preoccupied with getting undressed at the speed of light as her roommate.

“It’s my turn,” Zinnia said, very clearly looking at Olivier’s eyes so she wouldn’t look elsewhere.

“Get up. Come here.” Olivier said, leaving the undressing for later. She had more important matters to tend to at the moment. Her calmness, though, would only last as long as Zinnia’s uneasiness would. Then, Olivier would crumble and there would be no force on this earth who could stop it from happening.

“Okay…” Zinnia did as she was told and rose slowly from the floor to approach the bed.

“Sit.”

Zinnia sat down and looked up at Olivier. She had to bend her neck back a little in order to look her in the eye and not at the black undershirt that was literally right in front of her.

“I don’t really mind the floor,” Zinnia said at once. She’d grown to like it, especially the perspective it allowed her to have from down there in the mornings. She could see where this was going and she didn’t know how she’d deal with it once it was out there.

“I do. You could… I mean, if that’s okay with you, you could sleep with me here.”

Out of the corner of her eye Zinnia tried to discern just how wide this bed was and whether it would kill her to accept that proposition without blushing.

“It’s…” She did blush, indeed. “Small.” Narrow and warm and delicious. And a leap about two miles too big for today.

“You’re not sleeping on the floor,” Olivier reminded her. “I can steal a mattress from somewhere.”

It would be embarrassing, to say the least. Walking into a crowded dorm just to haul one of the spare
mattress onto her shoulders and promptly head back to her own room. It would give the men something to talk about, for sure. And she still didn’t want them to know.

“What’s changed to make you want to go to such extremes? I thought you were fine with me sleeping on naked wood.” Zinnia smirked without being able to stop herself.

“You know full well what’s changed,” Olivier almost barked.

Zinnia gave a little laugh that hid more nervousness than actual humor.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to do anything,” she said in the end. “I’ve slept in worse places than your floor.”

“You’re not sleeping on the floor.” Olivier repeated, putting her jacket back on, slowly, as if she wanted to let Zinnia savor it. “I’ll be right back. Feel free to fall asleep.”

“Not doing that.”

“Stop waiting up for me.”

“Now that I’ve all the incentive to?” Zinnia said, giggling.

Chapter End Notes

I will let you know that the conversation these two have on top of the wall had me making the most ridiculous noises (blame my own feels) when I first drafted it. And, of course, I just made noises rereading it too.

Also, shoutout to devoiddeavor, who finally gets to read some talking scenes :3
All about winning

Chapter Notes

and hence the self-indulgence begins! (does it ever end - I’ve now officially written 300k words of mere self-indulgence, so the answer has gotta be no)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the day arose, new and fresh like snow falling from the sky, it didn’t erase everything that had happened the day before. And maybe it should have, Olivier would have had her conscience clear.

She had run, losing all poise and all the reputation she’d made herself believe she deserved. And then the world had gone to shit, and she’d been the one responsible for it. She might manage to build a new world from the remnants of the old one, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t shattered it to pieces without the slightest bit of remorse.

She’d woken up early and she’d cracked one eye open just to check the girl was still there. A new day that followed yesterday’s early storyline would have meant the girl would have been far away by now, in that life that Olivier had never gotten a glimpse into. And that’s what Olivier should have wanted—a normal life, an insight into what other people had that she had given up on—, but she didn’t want it now, the same way she never had.

It brought her joy to see the girl there, asleep and safe, almost level with her own mattress. If Olivier reached out a little—just a little—she might be able to brush hands with her. And how ridiculous that would be, she told herself.

Yet how sweet and … rewarding.

Contact for the sake of contact. That existed, and she could have it now if she asked. I won’t take anything you don’t want to give, Zinnia had said. They both could build a ladder of their own wants and needs, and that was a practice as old as time and just as forgotten.

She would be nineteen again, now. And she’d long ago thought that her nineteen-year-old self had had a lot to grow into. How did one grow backwards, exactly? How did one become their old self in order to improve it?

Maybe it all started with this morning, the morning of change.


It couldn’t possibly be so hard. It just took discipline and a level head. She could do this. And yet she remained in bed, feigning sleep, until she felt the other woman stir next to her.

Olivier had to close her eyes and keep the memories of the day before out of her mind. She wouldn’t function normally with them sprinkling her in emotions all day long.

Zinnia sat on her mattress, rubbing her eyes in order to get rid of the fog-like vision that followed waking up, and took a quick look at Olivier, who she supposed was still sleeping, before she picked up her clothes and started to get dressed, eyes droopy still.
“Where are you going?” Olivier asked, in order to startle her. It definitely wasn’t about the question itself but the act of asking it when it was least expected.

“Work.” Zinnia yawned, not at all taken aback. “Plus, I have to scream at your captain for … being indiscreet.”

The whole fort at some point had wished for a chance to scream at Buccaneer precisely about this. About the meddling—unnecessary meddling.

Zinnia dropped her undershirt on the floor and Olivier quickly bended forward to pick it up for her.

“Yes, please do,” she said as she gave it back.

She made an effort out of not establishing eye contact, hoping to convey a casual and laid-back mood, but she just cursed herself in silence when Zinnia definitely eyed her like a woman who wanted to be eyed back.

“Should we… see each other for lunch or something?” The question itself would have been fine in any other context, and it was in this very context that Zinnia came to regret not having paid more attention to relationship stuff while she’d still been in one she could have learned from.

Who asks this? No one. You ask it because you’re an idiot, she reprimanded herself, quickly getting her arms through the t-shirt’s holes.

“I don’t know,” Olivier replied. She was still sitting on the bed as if she didn’t run this whole place. It was a bit unnerving to be hurrying while she was so content over there. “We usually do.”

“Yes, but I mean, do you want to do something with me?” Zinnia said, cocking her head a little, letting her bangs cover the fact that she was not at all confident about the decision of asking this so very straight-forwardly. She would not ask Olivier Armstrong about what normal couples did in their free time, not just because she was embarrassed to do so but because she had a hunch Olivier had even less of an idea about what couples did. “After work. Or before work. Or at night. Any time is good for me.”

Wasn’t that what people said before making a professional appointment? Was Zinnia really so rusty? She’d written decently poetic stuff before, couldn’t she just make an effort and channel that corny vein of hers instead of talking like a secretary?

She let all her air out, trying not to look flushed.

Olivier blinked.

“You might benefit from training again, if you’re staying.”

And Olivier might benefit from the sights as well. It was a mutually benefitting deal that she wouldn’t admit to wanting.

Zinnia rolled her eyes at the mention of her staying and the implication that she might still leave (she wasn’t, she had never meant to), then she nodded, tying her laces.

“I was planning on kicking your ass sometime soon, anyway.” Her smile grew as she spoke and it was dazzling. She still had hope to move the mountain, indeed.

“Walk before you run,” Olivier said sarcastically from the bed, then she wrapped herself in the blankets and turned her back to a blushing Zinnia.
Running is what I’m good at, she thought to herself, taking one last look at the illuminated room and the woman giving even more light to it than the dawn ever would. In her stomach, asking for nourishment already, she had a sinking feeling that the conversations they’d had wouldn’t be enough to quench her uneasiness.

She needed words for this. What were they were? Who was she?

If she were to get a tray of edibles and sit down to write her father another postcard that would get sent in spring, what would she even say?

*I fucked a senior officer of the military. And maybe I like her. And she hinted at maybe liking me back.*

And her dad would reply in lengthy and generationally inappropriate slang and punctuation that she could invite her home any day.

Thankfully, this morning Zinnia had very clear that she just wanted a croissant or something and to go straight to her department and *not* think about girls coming to her family’s home with her. Maybe she’d grab a cup of coffee as well, to stay awake and alert. She’d find a way to trick her mind into focusing later on.

*Olivier and my mum. Potent mix, isn’t it?*

She’d trick her mind into focusing, yes.

Into not thinking about this date to train again, which might entail something completely different from fighting.

Into not thinking about the last time she’d let go of everything and fallen and then dared to pull Olivier down with her as well. *Bold. Bold move.*

There would be no way she wouldn’t think about this for the rest of her life, wouldn’t there?

And, apparently, judging by what she could hear from just around the corner, where Buccaneer’s table was, the world didn’t plan on helping her move it along.

The door to the department was closed, so Zinnia pressed her ear against it, trying to pick up what the voices inside were saying. It was Buccaneer, she really shouldn’t have wondered too long what it was about.

“I’m bored,” he’d just said, yawning.

“Find something to do,” said Miles, dully. Miles, his ever-present second-hand man for matters of the heart—foreign heart, never Buccaneer’s own. “Don’t you have routes to plan?”

“And budgets to make. And people to bother. Guess what I’ll choose?”

“Budgets,” Miles said, still hoping one day Buccaneer decided to listen and do exactly that. Would the world have been a better place without his incessant gossip and his interest in other people’s lives? Arguably, yes. Would anyone really want to live without having something, morally ambiguous as it was, to do? Not really.

“You thick little tree…” Buccaneer told him, chuckling. “Isn’t there anything new on that office of yours I could read?”
Oh hell fucking no, Zinnia thought. She’d been leaving the occasional dumb writing on Olivier’s table, because they’d played at that game before and it was always worth it to score a blush or a frown. But not from Buccaneer, definitely not from the one guy who could turn those into a bulletin board.

“Even if there was,” Miles said calmly. “I’ve been ordered to keep you away. Expressly.”

“No need to break my heart, eh?” Buccaneer laughed. “Who says I can’t just sneak in for a second to, um, consult something with you?”

“Me. And don’t start. Just take this as what it is: an extracurricular activity.”

“I’ve sightings on the boss dragging a mattress all by herself last night,” Buccaneer said proudly, like he’d been the first to find out about a royal marriage.

Miles rolled his eyes.

“There’s several theories going around.”

“In one night? That’s impressive,” Miles said, very unimpressively.

“Where does Olivier hide her, huh?” Zinnia did her best at just closing her fists very tightly and not busting in right that second to show exactly where she’d just been hiding. The little shit... “No one knows. No one thought to ask, either. Amateurs.”

Miles got fed up. “Why do people need an extra mattress for, I wonder, Buccaneer?”

Buccaneer took the question seriously. “Not fucking. You’d use a big one for that.”

“I don’t even know why I talk to you.” Miles took a few steps towards the door, and the handle on Zinnia’s side of it moved. She quickly pressed herself against the door, sucking in air, so that when he left the room he wouldn’t see or hear her there. The idea of making an entrance was appealing, but the idea of getting caught red-handed was not. “You’ve patrol after kitchen duty. That’s all I came here to say, and good day to you.”

“Hey, no need to be grumpy because the boss has chosen a girl over the likes of you, Miles,” Buccaneer said. “What were the odds of a girl coming in here?”

“Exponentially smaller than the odds of you getting your nose split in two this week.”

“Love you too!” Buccaneer chuckled as Miles finally got the door open and left.

Then Zinnia came in, not caring in the slightest that it hadn’t been long enough for her silence to count as being stealthy, walked past Buccaneer and said matter-of-factly while she plopped down on her stool:

“Has anyone ever told you how nosey you are?”

Buccaneer laughed without any real amusement. So she had heard, huh?

“You might benefit from a nose job,” Zinnia observed. “Miles looks skilled at it.”

“Careful, there, girlie. I’m very good at my job.” He grinned. “As you may have been able to ascertain yourself.”

She crossed her arms at him.
“Open a matchmaking place, then. After you retire.”

Buccaneer’s whole chest seemed to stop moving for a second, and she was momentarily afraid that he, in his terribly not old age, had just had a stroke or something. Then she realized it wasn’t an affliction, but shock at what she’d said. Was he … retiring any time soon or something? Wasn’t that a good thing, too?

“No need to be so aggressive, kid,” he said. “This is what life is like here at Briggs, I thought you knew.”

“Oh, I know, alright. But don’t you have more couples to pester?” she almost begged. “What’s the name of the guy that asked another out in the shower? Um…”

“Madsen,” Buccaneer said at once. “I don’t just engage in any matchmaking. There’s nothing in it for me, kid.”

“And there was something in it in this or something?”

Buccaneer looked her in the eye and quit playing around.

“No other couple getting together benefits people I care about.”

Zinnia stopped on her tracks. “So you’re doing this out of the goodness in your heart, to make us happy?”

He nodded and she just thought to herself: _Fuck, he really means it._ It made sense that Buccaneer’s love language was meddling intensively.

“That’s one way to look at it.”

Zinnia buried her face in her hands and groaned.

“Doesn’t it?” he asked. “Make you happy? You’re happy, she’s happy… and no one’s being yelled at.”

“Kinda. But—I mean…it’s not your happiness to command. We’ve done this at your pace—the pace you wanted for us—and now I have no clue what to do.” She glared at him, knowing full well this meant belaying her own discretion rules. Olivier would kill her for it. “And I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

Buccaneer smiled like a dad. Which in a way he’d always been. Oldest of them all, Buccaneer knew more than he let on, and he used that information as well he could.

“Look, people are simple when you look at them. I, for one, wouldn’t mind a bit of payment in the form of _free_ time, if you know what I mean. Kitchen wastes half of my day.”

She rolled her eyes but let him continue.

“In any case, back to people, that woman…” His face contorted, as if he was thinking about some hard to solve puzzle. “Oh well, yeah, she’s pretty hard to read, ain’t she?” He laughed loudly. “Guess you’re on your own.”

“Aaaaaand back to our scheduled screaming,” Zinnia muttered to herself before she did scream at him: “You can be excited all you want about your little project, but now the little project’s flown away from you and it won’t come back, so you’d better get your hands on something else, are we
He just kept laughing.

“Especially since I can’t tell you how to crack the code that is the general.”

“Right.”

Buccaneer, even though he’d tried his damnest not to laugh in Zinnia’s face during her little speech, was behaving quite spectacularly during lunch. He’d taken a seat with everyone else, just gorging on food while his ears absorbed today’s talk about the density of the mashed potatoes, the insipid weather that allowed for basic maintenance tasks, and the fact that it was always—and that ‘always’ was uttered markedly—good to have an extra person working in something. At that, Buccaneer had directly ogled Zinnia with big beady eyes, but she’d pretended she was more interested in the conversation than finding out he thought it was about her.

Which it turned out in the end to be, because Buccaneer might have been silent, but his clique still hadn’t gotten the news that the gossiping needed to take a more subtle change from now on if they all wanted to conserve their noses.

Austin and the younger men were surprised with her sudden decision to not abandon them for warmer regions, or so they said, although they didn’t look that surprised to her.

Some shrugged, and Austin just said: “Nice to have another pair of hands around. Practical.”

Buccaneer tried to look up at him and maybe dare to say something but Zinnia’s perfectly fake outer resolve calmed him down and forced him to reconsider.

She snorted softly.

“You could handle yourselves perfectly well and you know that,” Zinnia said. This was just becoming an old game that never ended, like chess when one was reduced to play with just a king and a pawn.

They tugged at her, even if she let them tug, and tried to orchestrate things so the gossip wouldn’t die and their boss would be happy and content. If only they knew maybe Zinnia had been her greatest headache, they would have stopped trying ages ago.

Although she had to admit… when seen from the outside it must have been fun to play around like gods and hope for beautiful consequences, like only mediocre gods hoped for.

“One more patroller means we get more hours to sleep,” Buccaneer said at last. And she could tell he’d bitten his tongue a little.

“Sleeping is so important, yes,” Zinnia commented went along, smirking to herself. None of them wouldn’t say what they were thinking about all of this. They had to rationalize it into work benefits.

_Honestly, these people need to chill a little_, she thought. _And maybe so do I?_ After all, she was playing around, too, faking the image and behavior of a rough soldier from the mountains when all she’d be is a town girl who liked weird things and people when they were at a reasonable distance.

“Haven’t you thought about joining the military?” someone else asked, clearly only seeing the rough
soldier she was channeling through her slightly deeper voice and her squared shoulders—which were beginning to hurt.

“And spend my life dressed like this? No, thanks.”

“You’d follow the best of the best,” Austin commented in what he meant to be an innocent tone that she almost broke character at.

Seriously? They were getting into dangerous grounds now, they were almost letting it slip.

“And learn to shoot like a man.”

She raised her eyebrow. She wasn’t precisely the best at aiming, but she was always quick to hit something. And right now there were a few necks begging to be targets of a good slap.

Zinnia took a sip of her water as if it were beer.

“No need,” she said. “Shooting like a woman is fine. One of the best soldiers alive is one, after all.”

After that, there were a few uncomfortable glances between the men, and Zinnia smiled to herself. That was all it took, wasn’t it? And they could’ve used it against her, but maybe she’d been smart to use this card now and in this very manner.

No one in this fort would ever dare speak evil of Olivier Armstrong.

“It’s not like we’re all born knowing how to shoot,” Austin said after a while in a small voice, trying to smile comfortably at Zinnia. “But I’m sure she could learn faster than any of us.”

“Do I have any choice?” she said with a smirk, her voice definitely now evoking Olivier’s when she got into her professional angry mode. The men were responding well to it, the chuckles that followed confirmed that they liked this more than she did. They didn’t exactly expect it of her—or at least of the girl they’d seen wandering among them before. Were things to be any different now they knew she wasn’t going anywhere?

Would things change even more when word got out that she was dating their … boss, to put it like Buccaneer would?

Or would she just be accepted as one more of them? She worked hard like they did, had trained to be able to handle herself out on the patrols the same way they did, and she’d definitely earned the spot she slept in. A privileged spot in many ways more than one that… separated her from them, in the end.

But Zinnia didn’t want to be a man of Briggs. She’d wanted in into its heart and she’d slowly mellowed the iron walls around it. Now, it was another question entirely to know what she would do with it once she had it.

Because that heart had long hands as well.

“Gotta go, folks,” she said after a while. “Places to be, equipment to clean, guns to shoot.”

She winked at them and disappeared as quickly as she could behind an aura of faked resolve that hadn’t been too unpleasant to acquire.

Only when she’d crossed and closed the door that led to the kitchens did she realize that now she was to walk into a lair she couldn’t escape because she’d agreed to enter it of her own free will.
It is night, the curtain falls. And all our vulnerabilities come forth, she thought philosophically. And today I’m meant to stay, en garde, and hit hard. Perfect plan, yes.

She could channel a bit more of that tough lady energy just for a little longer. Minutes would suffice. It was night, the curtain’s fall was to follow, and all she’d pretend to be would vanish before Olivier’s very eyes.

“Day fucking one,” Zinnia muttered to herself as she opened the door and walked in. Her footsteps echoed in the emptiness of the room, and the memories inside it that were still waiting to be picked up in gentle hands.

Zinnia shooed them away.

There were things in that place that tugged at her more exquisitely than any man of Briggs ever would in his desperate try at matchmaking. Memories and possibilities all in one room. And all the feelings that came with it and stayed within, what was she supposed to do with them?

She knew well by now that Olivier wasn’t the only one who channeled negative emotions through physical exertion. Zinnia hadn’t really done it consciously before, maybe she would now, if only not to succumb of the beauties of being trained by the, as the men had put it, best of the best.

Zinnia would be a danger to the world once inside that gymnasium and she found that she didn’t care. It was time to stop feeling guilty for things she had no control over. Now she had been given the green light to own her feelings, and to act upon them.

Once you have what you want, how do you learn how to want it properly?

Looking around the place and trying not to let the memories take over, Zinnia removed her jacket and hung it somewhere. A smile crept all the way up from her belly to her face when she saw the very patch of dry floor where once she’d dreamed about her present life.

Ah, no one ever really learns how, do they?

Buccaneer walked into the room to run into a half-naked Miles lifting more weight than there even was in his tree-like body. Buccaneer had a very unusual routine here, he basically just punched things and touched up his metal arm while he eavesdropped, but he couldn’t help but come closer to Miles, especially in light of this morning’s conversation.

“Are you over your ridiculous grumpiness?” he said in place of all greeting.

“Yes.”

“Then why aren’t you talking to me?”

“I’m busy working out?”

Buccaneer blinked flirtily. “Oh, Miles, do you like me? Are you afraid I might refuse you?”

Miles stopped doing his routine for a second.

“Can’t you just be normal? For one day,” he said. “Just one day, Buccaneer.”

Buccaneer grinned and got the boxing gloves out. “You’d get bored.”
Miles sighed.

“There is no literal room in this place for that to happen. We need another storm…”

Buccaneer chuckled, “Who knows what new disasters that would bring…. You might even kiss me.”

Miles was about to say something very improper of him about Buccaneer’s mother when Buccaneer’s head literally turned towards the wall and he brought a finger to his lips as he walked on tiptoe towards it, leaving his gloves behind.

“You’re ridiculous.”

Buccaneer shushed him.

“C’mere.”

“What? No.”

“Miles!” Buccaneer hissed. “Come the fuck here.”

Miles dropped his weights and did, chest bared and sweating. He looked at Buccaneer, panting a little and his quirked eyebrow a good a mark as any of his inquisitiveness.

“Listen,” Buccaneer said when Miles didn’t react visibly.

If only to shut him up sooner, Miles pressed his right ear against the wall, fighting not to roll his eyes for the umpteenth time today, and then he opened them wide.

It sounded as if… two people were either working out like he had been or… indulging in much more private activities.

He prayed to whoever was listening that it wasn’t who he thought it was—and who Buccaneer had already assumed it was.

Zinnia had been about to land her final hit, the one that would crown her climber of the mountain and queen of wrestling. It had surged in her chest like lava. She was doing it, she was defeating the unbeatable queen of the ice, and it wasn’t even being that hard.

In the next heartbeat, though, Olivier had already grabbed her by the arm to stop her from landing anything and had pulled her close at once in a challenge, and a definite sign of victory.

Damn it… But Olivier would never let her win. She had to earn it.

“You’ll never beat me like this.”

A few more breaths, a pile of more seconds, and Olivier’s grip on her was just as decided. Zinnia composed herself. A victory wasn’t supposed to be celebrated until it was secured. And Olivier was standing at nothing but her own will to win, which right now amounted to so very little…

“I’ll beat anyone just slightly less practiced than you,” Zinnia counterattacked, right arm grasping at Olivier’s left to show her that past this point two could play at this.
“Show me, then,” Olivier challenged her.

Zinnia narrowed her eyes and widened her smirk. *Oh, really?* If she wanted to play, Zinnia still had a few aces up her sleeve that had nothing to do with finally beating her in combat. That might still be ages away for all she knew, but she was *very* good at other things that she maybe shouldn’t make use of lightly but didn’t especially care to at the moment.

The smirk was a warning, and Olivier only realized it when it was already too late to recoil. Victory? How about abysmal failure? How about she stopped trying and just let go?

When Zinnia robbed her of that sought-for victory and her coherence, Olivier could just abandon herself to the traitor’s kiss.

A low move, but one of the best. Besides, she needed to let go a little. She couldn’t not let go.

And as briskly as Zinnia had kissed her, she moved away, grinned like a fool, and smoothed the fabric of her pants.

*She will be the death of me*, Olivier thought.

She’d planned to die here up north, still standing in front of a titan nation for her country and her men. She would have liked to be buried in the common cemetery with the rest of the fallen, and she would have liked to die with honor in battle. She hadn’t even minded about the when. It could have happened any time, any day, in any circumstances. Olivier had learned to expect nothing of her job and of her life, things changed too quickly to be traced appropriately. Even the best strategists made mistakes and age would only make that worse, make her slower and slower every day.

On her first day as Major General, with so many people in her direct care and so many others to keep from being invaded, she had first felt it. The weight of the crown, the importance that she bore it well, and how much this place meant to her after all those years she’d been in its shadow. *If anything comes to happen to me*, Olivier had said during her first official speech in the Drachman Wars, before battle broke out and only one thing started to matter, *bury me under this fort. I'm going to haunt whoever fails to hold the border*.

In a way, it had sort of become the unofficial motto of her leadership years. No one here would ever question the idea of Olivier’s ghost remaining after her demise to remind them which tasks they were expected to perform flawlessly and why.

She’d planned to die where she stood that day and every day before that. And it would be impossible now. Zinnia would be the one to put an end to the general in her. Wasn’t she doing it this very second, those eyelashes committing all kinds of treason just by fluttering?

Her body, though, could still always rest at the border. And her ghost would never fail to haunt whoever newbies the new generals sent to Briggs. It had always been this way, it would always be, even after she was gone.

But that was so far away now. She couldn’t even remember why it mattered, and why it would matter still when she opened her eyes and the moment passed.

“I think I just won a war or two,” Zinnia commented casually.

“I think you’re a…” And Olivier found that she had no words to stay because she’d lost then in those brown eyes and the promise of being buried in them for just a few seconds.

She was a teenager in the body of a grown woman, scared and lost and much too willing to overlook
that. So many touches and so much banter words had gotten lost in the past few years, Olivier had forgotten how it felt to stand before someone who could use them well on her.

*Today I am the fool, and she’s the one training me,* she thought feebly. Then, she realized: *And I have no idea how to turn it around this time.*

“Do go on,” Zinnia said.

“You’re too smart for your own good,” Olivier was finally able to say. Dignified and calm, she tried to think coherently. If she let herself dwell in what was going on rather than in how she could still control at least a part of it, this would be over too soon and she would be the fool a lot longer than she’d planned.

Zinnia’s smirk grew wider, as if she’d seen into it. “Still won.”

Olivier brought a finger up to tap Zinnia’s chin.

“Don’t be cocky,” she said. “In a fair match, you would have lost.”

“Life’s not fair,” Zinnia said as she pulled away, deliberately disentangling herself from it all a lot slower than usual so it would entice certain feelings on the other woman—or so she hoped.

Olivier bit her lower lip just as slowly as Zinnia moved away.

*Did she just…?*

And she had. Pulled away and walked away in pristine calmness, as if none of this affected her. And Olivier couldn’t just pretend like it hadn’t absolutely elevated the register of the game.

She followed Zinnia’s footsteps until she was level with her, and then she gave a firm and definitely daring kiss to the right corner of Zinnia’s lips, hand slightly brushing with her.

“All wars lead to new ones,” Olivier said enigmatically.

“This isn’t a war, this is just…” Zinnia shrugged chirpily. “Conflict.”

“A conflict which can be *easily* resolved,” Olivier purred.

“Not gonna fight you again. Because I’ll probably lose and I need to enjoy this ego boost a little longer.”

Finally, it was Olivier’s turn to smirk.

“I wasn’t talking about *fighting*.”

And that was how Zinnia lost twice in the span of a few minutes. One could say no to winning when you were being offered such an interesting deal on the side…

Chapter End Notes

"Bury me under this fort. I'm going to haunt whoever fails to hold the border." This quote belongs to the wonderful Artemispolarbear <3 (thank you for our many many talks about writing and fandoms ily)
Olivier had no reason to be checking the noticeboards other than she was incredibly bored and had no desire to look at numbers that she remembered had made sense at some point in her life. Buccaneer might as well have done a wonderful job at them, she would never have known. All she could think of was her pounding heart, which shouldn’t have been pounding so early in the day and for no reason at all.

Except, well, maybe… the morning sights.

But now she was reading the noticeboards Miles worked at under her tutelage as if her entire life depended on it. He truly did his best at fitting every name in the minimum space, so as to save paper, and she had to squint to read them all properly.

She might walk around after that, making sure everyone was where they were supposed to be. She didn’t doubt they would, she just needed an alibi in case she got caught wandering.

*Now I’m looking for excuses. Grand. This year will truly go down in history as the year that thawed the ice wall of Briggs.*

She didn’t feel especially proud of it. She could always just frost it back to its original state someday. If she was able to, then. If she was allowed to by her circumstance.

*Zinnia Erwin, read the little meticulous scribble Miles called handwriting. I-6 shift.*

*That explains why she’s still sleeping.* Olivier had woken up first, as it was already usual in her, and hadn’t had the heart to rouse the girl. She was growing soft, thawing and soft, and soon she’d be as tender as chicken breast. If Drachma thought to invade now (which they wouldn’t, owing to their cowardice and fear), Olivier was sure she might even consider diplomacy before firing any canons at them.

All because of a girl who had overslept because she was to witness the life-changing shift all soldiers at Briggs had tried to bribe Miles to get, despite the hours it comprised.

Olivier hadn’t wanted anything to do with that shift, back when she had still been doing rotations, until she’d been assigned to for the first time. You didn’t just recover from that sunrise. Hers hadn’t been in the winter, and its beauty had merged with that of the season blooming slowly as the ice melted into rivers. Zinnia would get to see winter as it was meant to be seen, first cold and dark as its nature suggested, then slowly being bathed by light and slight warmth; a contradiction worth losing sleep for. Sometimes the light even created rainbows in the air.

Hands behind her back, Olivier finally began moving towards the stairs and left the noticeboard behind. It had been a while since she’d been able to treat herself to that sunrise.

She might as well just go with her, right? An extra pair of eyes in the blizzards of winter might spot the difference between a tree branch and a rifle hidden in the snow. Plus, Zinnia would be all alone on top of the wall for a few hours, freezing her butt off, and Olivier wouldn’t really sleep much in her room. She might as well really just go, if only to help Zinnia out in her first dawn shift.

She told herself that as she changed course, walking back to her office to tell Miles she was ‘taking
the rest of the day off” and he could handle anything that came up, which it wouldn’t. Things were quiet lately.

Afterwards, she headed straight for her room. She found it empty (thankfully, she couldn’t have stood a conversation about this with Zinnia herself), and got on the bed, not bothering to get under the covers.

She closed her eyes with a smile.

This would be fun.

Today’s training had been especially mild, Olivier had been almost on a cloud, or so it had seemed. Zinnia had gained a few new extra bruises on her thighs from sparring, but aside from that it’d mostly been a quiet practice, and she was grateful. If the intensity had been any higher, she’d definitely have to bail on writing so she could rest her head for the night shift. Zinnia hadn’t napped in too long, she was not starting now.

But she did kind of leave the library—her new, almost secret and definitely memory inducing writing place—with the idea to have a long shower, or maybe even a bath, before dinner and sleeping a little prior to her shift. She knew that it was pretty much going to be a few hours of sitting around doing nothing, so she wasn’t that worried about staying alert as she normally would. Her mind was on warm water and steam.

I wonder if we have bubbly soap somewhere, I’ll have to ask, she hadn’t yet because she’d never had the option of a relaxing bath. Nor enough confidence to huddle the big tub all for herself. Nor the lack of given fucks to literally bathe in front of lines and lines of naked men showering around her.

Things really did change with time, and it was perceptible in decisions like this one. Today, at least, the bath would have to wait; she needed to pick up a clean change of clothes.

So she headed upstairs while everyone else was already queuing for a first dish of whatever was being served in the kitchens, already visualizing herself reading something in the tub.

She passed a few friends—was she allowed to call them friends? Acquaintances?—on the way and smiled mysteriously. Nobody asked where she was going, and she puffed up a little so they wouldn’t think she was a tiny lost sheep again.

She yawned when she opened the door of the room, thinking herself alone, and when she unglued her eyes again she saw a huge lump of blue on the bed.

“What on earth…?” Zinnia muttered, biting her lip so she wouldn’t laugh out loud. “Someone slept little last night…”

This time she did let out a small chuckle. This was completely out of the ordinary: Olivier, napping. It should be on national news, accompanied by a picture of her messy hair, practically a blanket all on its own, and her feet dangling from the bed because she was a ball of a human right now.

Giggling to herself, Zinnia picked up her own blanket from the mattress on the floor and kicked the mattress aside with her foot to tiptoe closer to the bed and gently cover Olivier with the blanket. Slowly, Olivier got her feet back on the bed, and Zinnia smiled, content. Mission warmth: completed successfully.
She watched Olivier get comfortable in dreams for a few seconds, she couldn’t help it. The object of her corniest feelings was there, sleeping in what seemed to be a level beyond peace, and Zinnia was supposed to act like this wasn’t tugging at her heartstrings?

Zinnia leaned in and readjusted the blanket so it would cover Olivier’s shoulders, and her hand lingered when she did.

That was when the plan went south.

Still half-asleep, Olivier opened her eyes and blinked to get rid of the drowsiness that had flooded her brain.

“What are you doing here, flower girl?” she asked.

“Flower, what?” Had Zinnia heard right? Maybe Olivier was still half-asleep and not entirely aware of who she was with, and Zinnia would have killed to believe that, but she had no time to.

“…fuck,” was Olivier’s only answer as she pushed the so-carefully strewn blanket away and sat up, fully awake now.

“Did you just call me flower girl?” Zinnia stuttered loudly.

And Olivier had no justification that would work.

“The first time I saw you you had flowers in your dress.”

She remembers? Zinnia thought. She honestly didn’t know what to focus on. That… form of endearment that was just weird in every level, the fact that her flowery dresses were the reason for it, and that apparently they were so because Olivier had paid attention on her first day to Zinnia school. Zinnia just shook her head to clear it.

“Do I have them on me now?” Zinnia threw her hands up in the air. “I’m wearing military blue!” Which, in the right light, had become the very same thing for her that her own dresses had been for Olivier. But she was in no mood to acknowledge how hypocritical that would be, admitting that she thought of Olivier in terms of color most days. Blue and yellow. Gold for her hair and teal for her eyes.

“I told you I wouldn’t object to a change on that front.”

“Flower girl. You had all the vernacular in the world to choose from, you could have called me ‘city girl’ like Buccaneer does sometimes, but no. Flower girl, it had to be. Have I ever told you how much I despise flowers?” That last part was definitely an angry whisper.

Olivier just grinned like a fool because when she slept without needing it it always took her a while to remember that smiles were much too personal for her taste.

“I’m not apologizing,” she said, clearly finding it funny.

“Then call me anything else. Or I’ll keep flashbacking to sneezing and pollen and we’re going to have a problem.” Zinnia made an adorable pouty face that only made Olivier’s smile grow bigger.

Even if she wasn’t dreaming anymore, she couldn’t stop smiling.

“Shall I call you by your name, then?” Olivier said slowly. Zinnia immediately knew what was coming and her entire skin prickled in anticipation. “Zinnia…”
Zinnia felt shivers down her spine and had to immediately do something about the situation at hand so she wouldn’t want to be pinned against a bed for the remainder of the day.

“No, okay, fine. Flower girl’s fine. No names. I’m just going to let you… go back to what you were doing.”

She just grabbed a clean change of her uniform and headed to the showers, but she was unable to soak in the water as calmly as she’d imagined she would. She kept replaying the image in her head of the dress she’d worn the first time she’d set foot in the north and imagined she’d set fire to it. It had flowers on it, but flowers had always been innocuous to her unless they were literally in her presence—now, though, the flowers were in her name.

The alarm clock rang out of nowhere, at a different time than Zinnia was used to, and it felt like a tear in reality. She cracked an eye open, refusing to move from the bed just yet, and she saw that there was no light coming in from the outside world.

*Still night...* She closed her eyes again, stilling her breathing.

Then she moved like a resort to sit on the mattress.

*Fuck, I’m supposed to be up tonight.* She got dressed at the speed of light, not even noticing that the mattress next to her own was empty, and as soon as she closed the door and turned on the light of the corridor to quickly run upstairs, Zinnia gave the biggest startle of her life.

“What in the name of blessed sleep are you doing up?” Zinnia squeaked.

“Waiting for you,” Olivier just stated calmly. “You’re going to be late if you don’t hurry, by the way.”

Zinnia’s face tried to contort into several different expressions at the same time, and eventually she just had to shake her head to erase all of them and settle for ‘don’t you dare’.

“You’re going to punish me for being late?”

“Yes.”

“The wall’s not going to move…” Zinnia grumbled as she stomped forward.

Olivier couldn’t hide her amusement for the life of her. Someone didn’t deal well with an interrupted night’s sleep. Soon, when Zinnia had already waited around for a few hours, she would see the light. Literally. And the effort would have been worth Olivier’s while.

Olivier followed quietly, just thinking of the dawn and how beautiful it would be to witness that with her. It didn’t strike her as unusual, either, to be using the word ‘beautiful’.

They got into an elevator, because at this hour there wouldn’t be much traffic waiting to use them. The only people who were up were the ones patrolling, and the ones who kept watch inside wouldn’t really move from their assigned floors.

Zinnia yawned, leaning at the corner of the lift so she wouldn’t have to hold herself up all on her own.

“When I said that about you and I doing something,” she said, “I didn’t mean you’d… you know.”
“Oh, you think I’m doing this for you?”

“No, you’re doing it for you, I’m just saying it’s weird.” Zinnia yawned again.

Olivier smiled. “Grumpy.”

“It’s literally one in the morning. And I just woke up. Grumpy is all you’re gonna get,” Zinnia teased, definitely not grumpily.

When the doors opened and the gusts of cold wind hit her face, Zinnia’s sleep was smacked out of her. She said a quick ‘hey’ to the two men guarding the area around the elevator and watched as they stood up a little straighter when they saw who she had come with.

Their footsteps crunched against the snow piled on the floor and the sound of the wind pooling and moving and whistling overtook everything else.

“I’ll never get over how beautiful this is,” Zinnia commented. For a while, until they’d reached her allotted spot, neither spoke. Then: “You really didn’t have to come all the way here. I know how to keep watch.”

“I’ve been told this particular spot is more agreeable with company.”

Zinnia turned around a little. “I believe those two back there won’t be that far away. They can be company.”

Olivier frowned, displeased. “If you want me to leave, just say so.”

“I’d feel bad if I did,” Zinnia replied. Shocked as she was, because she’d certainly not been expecting it, she could appreciate the gesture. Olivier would very well be either working on whatever it was she spent so much time on or she could already be in bed, resting. And yet she was here, in the cold and ready to remain there for the upcoming five hours. Zinnia had to at least reciprocate that a little. “It’s nice of you anyway.”

“Despite what Buccaneer might say, I am very nice.”

Zinnia erupted into laughter.

“No, you’re not. You’re the least nice person I’ve ever met.”

Olivier wrinkled her brow.

“But nice is not everything in life,” Zinnia continued. “I definitely didn’t stick this out for ‘nice’."

“Why exactly did you, then? And I don’t just mean after I … clarified things.”

“I guess I just… kept lying to myself about what was going on. I kept telling myself I wasn’t waiting around for anything.” Zinnia looked down at her boots in the snow. “But I guess I was, in the end.”

“And before? Was it always just… defiance?” Olivier asked. She might as well just keep on asking, finding answers and pretending they didn’t make her heart settle into a feeling quite like contentment.

“I must admit… I’ve always been somewhat curious about it.” Inadvertently, she had switched into her formal mode, as if this was just another discussion about something important. She felt she might explode if she let her true emotions show in the conversation.

“I can’t believe I’m going to have to say this to you.” Zinnia giggled. “No, it wasn’t just defiance. I wrote you… stuff. I wrote you stuff, of course it wasn’t just a game to me: ‘I say this, you say that,
and at the end of the day someone wins’. Not that I didn’t like winning—and maybe even losing, on a good day. I just… All I had to do was be there and then eventually you would be too. And for a while that was enough.”

Olivier nodded. “Until I took you here, fed you and clothed you and—

“It wasn’t about the setting or the circumstances. I could’ve—” Then, in a much smaller, forced voice Zinnia finished the thought: “—developed a thing for you anywhere in the world.”

“I wouldn’t be me anywhere in the world, I hope you’re aware of that.”

Suddenly, Zinnia just sat on the snowy edge of the wall, and Olivier didn’t have time to warn her about the dangers of slipping into the abyss. She just did the same thing after some seconds, sitting on Zinnia’s left to try and shield her a little from the wind.

“Do I sound cold to you?” Olivier asked.

Zinnia cocked her head as she thought about it. “You sound to me like someone who’s lived a long, hard life. Not necessarily a bad thing.” She looked at her. “But… is it?”

Olivier laughed. “Are you asking me if my life is hard?”

“Well… yeah,” Zinnia said, not sure if that question had been the right one. “I don’t know much about you other than the … obvious.” She thought for a moment. “I figure it’s about time I crack the code of you.” To quote Buccaneer.

Olivier smirked softly. “I’m not that complicated, I assure you. What do you want to know?”

Zinnia thought about it. She wanted to ask something that felt important enough but that wouldn’t develop into something she wouldn’t know how to step out of.

“You said you hadn’t done this recently,” Zinnia said in the end. “Any… activity worth noting?”

Olivier was torn between wanting to laugh at her wording and the fact that she had, indeed, asked it so ambiguously.

The memories weren’t all kind to evoke. Many, many moments spent in a hurry, never focusing on any feelings she might have had, and then when she finally had… she’d been forced by circumstance to let it go. She got to talk about it, now. For the first time in fifteen years. Was it worth it?

But she saw complete understanding and patience in Zinnia’s eyes, clear as day in the middle of the night. And she didn’t fear telling this story now, not like she once might have.

“I was with someone, time ago. The only one worth mentioning right now.” Olivier quickly glanced at Zinnia to assess whether she was approaching this question too narrowly. “Or do you want to hear about the one-night stands too?”

“No,” Zinnia said, almost chuckling at the thought of sitting there in the bitter cold and getting to hear how Olivier Armstrong liked to fool around in her younger years, when she hadn’t had this duty resting upon her shoulders.

“Oh, so there was this girl, Ianthe. Don’t ask me to spell it, I’ve probably forgotten how.” Liar, Olivier’s inner voice counterattacked. She sighed. “I met her while I was in the academy, she lived close to the building where I trained. And… well,” Another curious look and a smirk shifted her face, Zinnia didn’t know whether to prepare for it or just pretend it wasn’t something that would
shock her. “Are you sure you wanna hear it?”

“Yeah, just go ahead. Can’t be that bad.”

*Oh, but it is, flower girl.* And it was much worse than Zinnia could imagine, which only made Olivier’s invisible smirk begin to sprout on her lips.

“It was sex at first sight.”

“Oh god…”

Olivier just smiled.

She still remembered that time, fresh as dew in her memories. Ianthe had never been with someone who didn’t shave their legs, and Olivier had never been with someone who did. It had been interesting. Very much so. Especially because the shaving issue hadn’t just been leg-bound. Very interesting, indeed.

If Olivier ever returned to Central, she’d have no trouble finding the exact spot where they’d … met. That wall in the shadows of a street that smelled like baked goods and powdered sugar. And from there on, she’d only have to follow the streets, hand on the worn walls, and she would eventually make it the house where she had been at her happiest, once. Maybe, if she ever returned, she would find the essence of the much more carefree Olivier still giggling there in the grass, alongside with Ianthe’s lost and surrendered love. She had lost that forever, and she’d thought she wouldn’t care.

*Fifteen years later and you still do,* she thought. But she didn’t say it out loud.

“I kept seeing her around, and I guess I just started flirting with her, and she with me.” In fact, Ianthe had been the one to catch her in her flirting nets. Olivier had been apt at a few moves, mostly the ones that meant just a hook-up or two, but Ianthe had known what she’d been doing all too well. “And we just … fell into place, I suppose.”

“People don’t just fall into place. What did you do? Ask her out?” Zinnia had a thought and laughed, then voiced it. “Take her to a shooting session or something? That’s popular with the girls, I hear.”

Olivier remembered the first few encounters that fit more into a storybook romance and ignored Zinnia’s joke. “I tried the usual courtship method via flowers. And in the moment that she opened her door I realized how stupid a plan it was to try and give plant corpses to a botanist.” Zinnia had to cover her mouth, and Olivier didn’t make her wait too long to hear the foreseeable conclusion to that anecdote: “She threw them in my face.”

“Sounds like my kind of gal.”

“Except for the liking flowers part.”

“Well, yeah.”

Olivier sighed. “It was all … normal, I suppose. She introduced me to her parents, and we mostly spent all of my free time in her house.”

Ianthe had been studying botany outside of school, thinking about possible careers in the future, and she’d always had time. Time had never been a problem for her.

Zinnia suddenly remembered what Olivier had said about her own family. “And never in your own place, right?”
A place which she incidentally imagined as a castle on a hill. All yellow and blue, a place most people didn’t have access to.

“Once or twice, at the most.” Olivier felt it was time to tell her. She would never have to take this home, because she had never returned, but the story of old censorships had been on the tip of her tongue for too long now. “My parents don’t know that I’m not interested in men. They wouldn’t approve.” And it didn’t escape Zinnia that she’d said it as if the situation hadn’t changed at all. “Mostly my mother.”

Olivier’s father had lived too much in his own perception of reality. He would probably just have started arranging marriages for her with high-born women instead of men.

“I remember, yeah,” Zinnia said, grinding her teeth. Her own mother had been… far from the perfect parent, but at least there had never been a word out of place about Zinnia being bisexual. “What happened with Ianthe, after?”

It felt weird to have Zinnia speaking Ianthe’s name, like the birth of a parallel universe.

“If didn’t you two… continue?” she finished her question.

“If I was sent north so I’d stay out of trouble. It was a common practice with troublesome soldiers back in my day—still is, I believe.”

“Troublesome soldier, were you?”

“Just a woman in a world of men. Which is, apparently, a punishable offense.”

Zinnia shut up. She’d had to put up with some sexist comments not that long ago, and she could only imagine what they must have done to a young girl who had the talent and the skills to become one of the best in the Amestrian military, all on account of her gender.

“I came here on orders, back when the war was still a war and not a so-called truce. And I…” Olivier paused to think whether she should perpetuate the lie she had back in the day or if she should tell the truth.

*Base your relationship on the solid base of honesty and you won’t need to lie around anything again. Base it on lies, no matter who small, and prepare yourself for an intricate web of them you don’t ever really get rid of.*

Olivier exhaled slowly. Her one and only real relationship had come to its abrupt end because of a lie, this one should start off with the truth. However small a truth that was. “And I couldn’t involve her any further.”

Zinnia gulped. “Oh. How… how old were you?”

“Twenty.” Olivier anticipated the question. “Fifteen years ago.”

Fifteen years in a fort, free and not trapped. But still isolated, her own feelings frozen with the ice in the mountains. It had been long enough.

“Yeah, okay, that counts as long ago. Longer than me, anyway.”

“How old are you, Zinnia?” Olivier asked in return.

“28 going on 29.” She didn’t have the heart to say that this particularly uneven 29 bothered her a
little with its proximity, looking over her when she had no control over when it came to stay.

Olivier was satisfied with Zinnia’s answer. She had thought so. That youth was still prevalent, not entirely gone, but the main core of it remained alive in the flower girl, even if it grew smaller by the minute. Rather than youth, perhaps, she should have called it innocence in the face of hardship.

The silence gave Zinnia the impression that she could keep talking and Olivier would listen. She gave clues on that front, always silently, if not curtly through words, but definitely there.

She decided to tell her own first story.

“I was still living with my parents.” Zinnia had been a child, proper, when Anthony and her had fallen in soft, sweet love. She told it all briefly, because it didn’t matter as much as it once had, and so Olivier listened to the tale of Anthony, the lifeboat and iceberg, for the first time. A summer romance turned solid for almost a year. Then, the flame had gone out inside Zinnia. She remembered that, too, but tonight all she wanted to bring back was the beginning of it, the happiness of it. “Gosh, that was almost as long as it was for you.” She laughed. “Twelve years. I hadn’t even realized it’d been that long.”

Olivier laughed softly too. Twelve and fifteen years, and then had come the voids they had managed to fill on their own.

“The ‘long’ maybe isn’t as important as the ‘when’,” Olivier said, philosophically. “I was a child myself. At that age, you know little and think it will suffice to take you however far you wish to go.”

She scoffed and said, in a softer voice, admitting to personal things rather than speaking in general: “Now I know even less than then, at least regarding personal relationships.”

It didn’t go unnoticed to Zinnia that it was hard for her to be talking about this so openly. No wonder why, either. It had to take a toll on you, to live so far away from a normal environment, to have distanced yourself from family and friends, all in the name of a cause. It was noble, but Zinnia thought it a high price to pay. And the fact that Olivier was bringing it up with her, who she barely knew, was nothing short of praise.

“If it helps, I can tell you something a little more on the personal side, too: I’ve never been in a relationship with a woman before,” Zinnia said conversationally. Then she blushed, and added: “Properly, anyway. There was a girl, time ago, but we were never anything because I was too scared to ask her out in time.”

Olivier smirked. “Reminds me of something.”

As it could be no other way, because that smirk was self-explanatory, Zinnia realized that, indeed, if Olivier hadn’t taken matters into her own hands, none of them would be on top of this fort right now. Her blush intensified.

“I’m a chicken, okay? I won’t risk it if there’s a chance I’m going to be publicly humiliated about feelings. And you can imagine why I thought it farfetched that a general of the Amestris military would look twice at me, let alone reciprocate… anything.”

“Well, look at us…” And Zinnia did, and she found that they had grown closer as they spoke, fighting the cold by connecting through body heat. “Not as farfetched as either of us deemed it.”

“I find it hard to believe you don’t know how stunning you are. Half your men are in love with you.” As per usual, Zinnia realized what she’d said only when she’d already said it and there was no possibly way in the world she could erase the words from Olivier’s brain.
Shit.

She saw the smirk on Olivier’s face spread to her eyes as well at the poorly veiled compliment.

“I doubt it.”

“I find it had to believe you don’t know how stunning everyone finds you,” Zinnia corrected herself, even if it was too late. “That, plus the sword and the…” She admitted it because she might as well.

“I’m the smallest Armstrong,” Olivier said, teasing only a little.

“You’re the—oh okay. That’s… Makes sense. Yeah. The smallest Armstrong, are you sure that’s right? I would probably faint if I ever met any member of your family, then. I can’t handle that much tall. How many siblings do you even have? You mentioned siblings at some… point, I think.”

“Four,” Olivier reminded her. In her head, she heard a different numeral. Three. Three but four. And that would be too long an explanation and too painful a remembrance for such a night. A night that should end in the dawn that captivated every soul, even the ones from Central, not at a mention of her so-called brother, the deserter.

Alex… Olivier thought. The one who had brought dishonor and betrayal. And they were but two sides of the same coin—Olivier had dishonored the Armstrong family by failing to adhere to its ideals and found what little solace she could in the military and Alex, the apple of his parents’ eye, had failed an entire institution in the course of a day yet had still preserved the love and admiration of his family.

As far as she knew, he was still living at the family home, the only adult Armstrong sibling who did. The last man standing.

But Zinnia knew none of that and, indeed, there would be plenty of time to break more family secrets to her another day. Winters were long, after all.

“I couldn’t even imagine, I’m an only child. What is it even like to grow up with so many brothers and sisters?”

Lonelier than you’d think.

Hadn’t Olivier chosen truth? Then why was she lying now? Or was keeping information even considered a lie? It was just an omission, and this time her reason for being here justified it.

“I’m not even sure I could tell you. The eldest after me, Amue and Strongine, were already to be married when I came here, I barely remember what it was like having them home.”

Those had been dark times, when both her younger sisters had married before her, the first born. It had been a disgrace to her mother’s eyes. At first, she and Mr Armstrong had tried to keep Olivier away from the public eye, in the measure that they could. After, they had done everything in their power to find her a suitable male partner that wouldn’t mind her manners nor her age. Her father, at least, had done so with good grace and naïveté, even when all of their plans failed.

Nobody had wanted a woman like Olivier, who knew what she wanted and what she didn’t. No one had been able to tolerate her difference, and no one had really known what lay in the heart of it.

“And,” Olivier said, “you must have heard about Major Alex Armstrong from Central Command.” That was all she meant to say about Alex, even if Zinnia said she had no idea who he was. “As for
The youngest, Catherine, I’ve never met her.”

The face Zinnia made broke Olivier’s heart.

“You’ve… never met your sister?” she muttered.

“I was sent a picture years ago on occasion of the birth.”

Zinnia was silent at that. She kept imagining a baby with Olivier’s eye color and her same hair, surrounded by all of her siblings except for the eldest, who was already far away fighting wars. She kept imagining what things would have been like in her own home if she’d had a sister. Would Zinnia really have felt the same way about leaving if there had been someone with her she felt she shouldn’t leave behind?

True, she had had her father, too. But a sister wouldn’t have been able to handle herself the same way her father had.

They were both silent for a long time after, so long they didn’t know anymore how much time had passed. From time to time, the clouds moved past their fields of vision and sparks of starlight shone in the dark sky.

Then, Zinnia spoke again. She shivered a little. Her heart was cold. The silence had only resulted in stirring up some old memories. It had been a long while since she’d been paying attention to the fields and mountains that stretched towards the horizon.

“I ran away from home,” she spoke very softly, as if she was scared of being overheard. “My… thing with that girl I told you about, Dew, didn’t really work out, and I thought I was over it but she, uh, got married eventually and I, well… I’d already been meaning to leave for a long time. My family has a butchery I was supposed to inherit and I had an ex-boyfriend who clearly wanted to have another stab at it and I just—I kept feeling I was living the wrong life. Central never really suited me. I guess—” She remembered fondly one thing Candie had said to her once, about liking extremes. “I guess lukewarm doesn’t do it for me.”

Olivier nodded, hurdling a little closer. It hadn’t left her indifferent to see the girl shiver from either the wind or the memories. Their arms touched.

“The choice is always between hot or cold; no one ever includes the option of lukewarm.”

“Yeah.”

“You were back, though, weren’t you?”

Zinnia nodded as well; she had a lump in her throat.

“I’ve been back a few times. To check on them, to… try and see if I’d ever outgrow the feeling. But it’s still there. And they keep wanting me back, to take care of the business and take care of them. And… that’s just not my life.” She laughed. “I don’t know what my life is, but I’ve an idea of what it’s not.”

Olivier’s smile was sly now. “I’ve landed myself a wanderer.”

“The opposite of you,” Zinnia remarked, looking her in the eye.

“Opposites attract, don’t they?”
“More than attracted,” Zinnia said, “I would say I’m intrigued.” Then she blushed again at how fast her heart was beating at the thoughts that followed after attraction had been established as a fact. “Okay, and maybe also attracted. But not because you’re my opposite. You just—are full of contradictions.”

“Human nature.”

“And they’re contradictions I want to understand. You save lives and you take lives, but your greatest efforts lie in hiding that you care about them all.”

And Olivier was left speechless at that. Because it was the closest thing to cracking the code.

“Why?” Zinnia kept saying, now looking at the mountains and the sky in the night, but still never at the border. It was as if she’d forgotten she was here on patrol, not on a date. Although, she had to admit this was starting to become a date spot lately. “You’ve built a home out of this place. These people… they’re your family and you’re theirs. They must know already that you care.”

“I’m not supposed to,” Olivier finally said. “I’m supposed to keep them safe, not mourn them if I fail. I’m supposed to stand here and not notice who is missing, because what matters is the wall, not who watches it.”

She said it to the wind, but Zinnia heard her. Her heart broke a second time. For the woman saying those words and the ghosts beneath them.

“But, yes, I care.” Olivier sighed. “Human nature, again. Infallible even when it shouldn’t be.”

Zinnia thought about it and looked at her. In this light, in the snow and the dark, Olivier looked even small, hard a feat as that was. She looked like just any normal woman in the world, with normal burdens on her shoulders. And the fact that this differed so enormously from reality made Zinnia’s blood boil.

“So you want to be cold, then? Is being cold what you’re going for?” Then, she asked what she was biting her lip to: “Is … this also about you being cold?”

She didn’t have to elaborate on the ‘this’ anymore, they both understood.

“I won’t deny that putting distance between my emotions and my work is a must for me. But,” Olivier said, emphasizing the last word, “you being here is nothing but a sign of me thawing. Anyone else would have ended up in North City under North Command’s jurisdiction. Anyone else with as many requests as you had would have mined my patience as well. And that’s the reason I knew: you weren’t anybody else. And I couldn’t keep pretending you were.” Olivier locked eyes with Zinnia, their blue as freezing-cold as the temperature. “You being here is nothing but a sign of me thawing.”

Zinnia gulped.

“Me being here is nothing but a sign of my absolute inability to process a crush.” She winked. “Or do you think I just put this much effort into anything?”

“No, I figured you didn’t. But your cooking skills would have greatly improved if you had.”

Zinnia punched her softly in the right arm. Olivier felt the wind flow between them for that second until Zinnia pressed herself against her again.

After that, she wrapped an arm around Zinnia’s shoulders. And for a moment neither of them moved.
“Cold?” Olivier asked.

“It’s winter, cold is a given.”

“I’ll go get you something warm to drink, then.” And at that she stood up, dusted the bits of ice off her clothes, and marched down to the coffee machine. “Don’t freeze on me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, General.”

Olivier walked away, pretending she didn’t get the strangest, softest feeling when Zinnia addressed her directly.

It was late and, despite the nap she had taken earlier to be more alert now that she currently was, her eyes were droopy. And she did not want to fall asleep tonight. Not for one minute of it. This was the reason she’d been sleepless for the past many months, and it was happening right underneath her nose, right between her arms.

Getting something to drink had been a splendid idea. She might even last for the full night without having to close her eyes if she drank a few cups of coffee.

She returned with two mugs and sat back on the cold stone, this time not bothering to pretend and directly putting an arm around Zinnia, however gently.

“Thanks,” Zinnia said, wrapping her fingers around the mug.

“Write me something,” Olivier asked all of a sudden.

“Now?”

“Drachma won’t attack.” It seemed to Zinnia as if Olivier was saying, ‘I’m here, and if they do, they will see me and perish before I let them get close to you’.

“Still, I’m supposed to be working and this has slowly given way to something like… a date. A peculiar one but still a date. What would be the usual punishment for, say, Austin doing such a thing?”

Olivier snorted at the question. “Austin gets dishes. He despises doing them.”

“Okay,” Zinnia said, understanding how unclear her meaning had been. She moved a little closer to her left, now definitely pressing herself against Olivier’s body. “What would I get, if I wasn’t me?”

“Something that annoyed you,” Olivier answered impassively, as she felt her heartbeat speed up when Zinnia started gaining terrain on her. “Something tortuous and long that taught you a valuable lesson.”

The words came out of her but her breath had become a separate entity within her. She had to focus and try to control it, but it was increasingly hard.

“What lesson?” Zinnia asked, very, very softly, very close to Olivier’s right ear.

“That you should make a date out of work if you’re with me,” Olivier murmured right back, and then couldn’t help it, her hand moved on its own accord from Zinnia’s shoulder to her face, to feel that jawline under her gloved thumb. She had an unhealthy amount of adoration for that jawline.

“Wrong lesson,” Zinnia muttered.
“I’m not so sure right now…”

And then Olivier kissed her. And, of course, it was the right lesson, the right punishment. Tortuously long…

“Write me something,” Olivier muttered again. “Without filters. Because I know you have them.”

And Zinnia’s lips felt dry, her tongue unable to wet them.

“I didn’t need them at first,” she admitted. They were still pressed together, their faces almost touching, dancing in the infinitely small distance separating each other. “But… things escalated. I’m not good at writing about the truth.”

But Olivier shook her head. “You are. You don’t know but you are.”

“What I see and what I may write from that perception… is not the truth. It’s just my truth.”

“Well, then it’s that truth that I want, if you want to give it.”

Then Zinnia started talking, and it was so different from reading her words. This wasn’t careful, it wasn’t premeditated, it was word vomit in a gentler form—honesty without brakes.

Zinnia was aware that this wasn’t editable, this wasn’t ink on paper or thoughts in her mind, volatile and forgettable. This was actual speech, which was leaving her mouth and reaching someone’s ears, sinking into her brain.

“I’m here but you and I both know I shouldn’t be. Who am I to meddle? To make use of a world that’s not mine by right or choice. You’ve walked these corridors for years, you’ve gotten blood on your hands, you’ve lost people on the way. You know things I can only imagine, and I can only imagine them poorly, because in my mind they are but a meek reflection of what is and was your reality. I pale in your presence, not just because you are who you are and have done terrible things, but because I want in into that life of evil-doing and mellow justice and that life is not the place where I am to belong. Yet it’s where you do, and that’s why I grow curious. Because it’s you I want to unravel.”

Zinnia looked away after that. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she knew that heart wanted to take it all back. Truth—her truth. A dangerous thing to offer without a second thought.

“I like that last part,” Olivier said impassively.

Zinnia laughed.

“Came up with it on the spot. Needs work.”

“Don’t write that one down. I’d rather remember it. It makes it special, in a way, that I can’t keep it hidden in a drawer,” Olivier said, sighing as she looked at the clearing horizon. An imperceptible ray of sunlight had begun to break through, upwards into a sky than in a few minutes would be both orange and blue. “I keep them all.”

Zinnia looked at her, unable to believe what she was hearing. Had Olivier just said she kept them?

“Like receipts?” she said with a smirk.

“Like…” Olivier frowned. She couldn’t find the right word for what those writings meant to her. “Something more than memories.”
“Badges of honor?” Zinnia said.
Olivier chuckled. “No.”
“I honestly had no idea. I thought you just… threw them away.”
“Then why keep writing them?”
“Do you really need me to tell you? After so long?” Zinnia said. Every beat of her heart was a ‘she keeps them’, hidden and silent and doubly real. “Can you tell me why you kept them?”
“Yes.”
“Oh.” She hadn’t expected that.
Finally, what had seemed to be just a few dashes of light rose from behind the mountains in a ball of icy fire, proud and still dormant. The mountains seemed to have changed color under that new light.
“You saw me,” Olivier just said. “You didn’t just see what I’d put up for the world to.”
“Well, in my defense I’ll say you’re terrible at hiding,” Zinnia said, again too close. “Too tall.”
Olivier gave one last longing look at the sunrise and fixed her eyes on Zinnia’s. Brown like the heart of a spring summit, brown and perhaps with the slightest tint of green. Spring, without a doubt.
Spring and winter.
Then, she rose, like the sun, and Zinnia looked at her as she did.
“Come on up,” Olivier said, offering her a hand to help her up. “Your shift is over.”
And Zinnia wrapped her fingers around Olivier’s hand and stood as well. If the soldiers finishing their shifts alongside the top of the fort had looked at them right that second, they would have seen the silhouettes of two woman against the newborn sunlight of winter, holding hands.
They descended together in silence. They had worn their voices thin by talking for so long in the cold of the night, in their hearts they coveted the warmth of their room and a few hours of sleep before the hectic flow of activity at Briggs woke them up.
Olivier sat Zinnia down on the bed, even if it wasn’t her turn to use it.
“Don’t argue,” Olivier just said.
And Zinnia didn’t. She’d slept about four hours that night and all that talking about emotions had made her even softer than usual. She doubted she could be biting now even if she wanted to, especially now that her attention wasn’t even slightly focused on the invisible border.
But when Olivier began to take off Zinnia’s boots, as if she did so every night, Zinnia complained.
“Petition to argue now,” she mumbled, then rubbed at her eyes, repressing a yawn.
“You can’t,” Olivier said, finally getting a boot out and placing it underneath the bed. Then she set to work on the laces of the other.
When she was done, she turned around to get Zinnia’s PJs out of the drawer, but Zinnia stopped her with a quiet:
“Come here.”

Olivier did, leaving the drawer open, and Zinnia got up, barefoot against the cold wood, and started to unbutton Olivier’s uniform.

“Don’t even argue,” she said, laughing a little, mostly from exhaustion.

“Do I look like I’m about to?” Olivier said, not resisting in the slightest.

She promptly leaned on Zinnia’s shoulder to untie her boots and kick them off, then she helped Zinnia into one of her night dresses like this was routine and not the sweetest of novelties.

“Now, off to bed, you,” Olivier muttered. “There’s work to do in the morning.”

Zinnia obeyed quietly, this time not bothering to pretend she wasn’t yawning, and clung to the hem of covers like little kids did, the biggest smile on her face.

“Technically, it’s morning now.”

Olivier shook her head with a smile and leaned in to kiss the crown of Zinnia’s head before getting to the mattress opposite the bed, but Zinnia gently wrapped a hand around her wrist and looked her in the eye.

“Get in with me,” she asked.

And Olivier was too tired indeed to argue that it made no sense, having two beds and not using them, because indeed it made sense. It made beautiful sense. And if she had an invitation, she might as well. She’d been dreaming of it since the very first night, not that long ago—but long enough ago to her.

She got into the bed as well, and Zinnia didn’t take longer than three seconds before she huddled closer and spooned her from behind, not daring yet to put an arm over her.

Olivier didn’t have the heart to tell her it was going to be a rocky, insomnia-induced morning.

Chapter End Notes

Olivier’s heart might be the one melting, but I’m already a pool of feels.
A scar on iron

Olivier fell into bliss like a bird shot from the sky. Her chest didn’t rise, it heaved; her lips curved into grins, not smiles; she didn’t feel like her emotions were incapacitating her, she felt like they were helping her grow the way she had never allowed herself to. And all she had to do now was let herself fall and fall. Zinnia would be waiting for her down at the bottom to catch her.

Falling was easy, then. She felt safe as she did, even knowing this wouldn’t last forever.

Life had become a feast of the work Olivier had given up on a normal life for and the girl who was showing her she hadn’t really missed out on much that she couldn’t still have. And she could have so much of it now, just by living. A second adolescence, triggered by something akin to love and something similar to happiness but never quite. She didn’t find the words, and she didn’t ask Zinnia to fetch them for her, because she was sure Zinnia would find them—stubborn as she was—and she liked not knowing them yet.

Their meaning seeped anyway into their room, early in the mornings as they awoke in the same bed, the old mattress forgotten against the other wall.

Sometime ago, Olivier had come up from the office earlier than usual and had found Zinnia sitting on her desk with the most dramatic thinking face, as if calculating where else to put it.

“Hoping to cut a hole in the wall?” Olivier had said as she kissed Zinnia’s forehead to say hi. Most times she didn’t initiate any sort of contact until they were both in bed, but it felt nice to indulge sometimes.

“Not really, I just wanted to figure out if a bigger bed would fit in here.”

Olivier had shucked her clothes off and put on something more comfortable, then she’d sat at the chair, and routinely Zinnia had gotten off the table to sit on her lap. She had still looked as if her eyes might have started punching a hole through the wall into the next cubicle down the corridor.

“You want a bigger bed, then?”

“Why not? We’re… sleeping in the same bed now. What do we need an extra mattress for? Also, wherever you nicked it from might probably benefit from getting it back.”

“It was in disuse.”

“And who is sleeping on the cold floors because of that excuse?”

“No one. I’m not like that.”

Zinnia had laughed. “Could we get the bed, then?”

“I guess so, I’ll just have to find money for it. And find a proper excuse. Unless you want everyone to know, that is.”

Zinnia had shrugged and Olivier had started to panic. Her nonchalance had only existed in appearances.

“I don’t think they’re too far from finding out. It’s already been long enough.”

“No one knows,” Olivier had assured her, innocently. She had to look up at her when they were
sitting like this. “But if you want a bed, I’ll get a bed. This one is old already.”

It wasn’t. But she’d be damned if she passed on a chance to do this properly. She’d wanted more space to cuddle at night without someone’s limbs dangling dangerously off the edge. Not that she would ever admit to that.

“Then I’ll get the mattress back,” Zinnia had said.

Zinnia had tried to get up but Olivier’s hand had wrapped around her wrist.

“It has to be now?”

“Depends,” Zinnia had said with a smirk. “What do you offer me in return?”

So Olivier had made arrangements for a new bed, which would take a while to arrive in the current weather conditions, and meanwhile the extra mattress was just laying around. A part of her, she guessed, was still waiting for Zinnia to tire of this and want her nighttime rest back.

Olivier, for one, was sleeping better than ever. It might have something to do with having company, as if her self-conscious was unable to fully believe a nightmare when there was a body next to hers who wouldn’t hesitate in punching the nightmares out of existence, even in the case that they had been real.

In the mornings, it showed. She felt as if the war was easier to win now that she had backup, and she woke up feeling a bit more rested and ready to face the new day, boring and dull as every new day dawned to be. But people seemed content with the lack of activity, and even she had to admit that a war breaking right now wouldn’t even please her. There would be too much to lose and mourn. Luckily for her and everyone else on the fort, the Mountain Men returned every time with nothing alerting to report, claiming that there had been no sightings of Drachman soldiers lurking around the border and that the horizon was still.

And in spite of Briggs’ forces having already deployed the tanks and canons in case of an invasion, Olivier’s new interest was the route Buccaneer had proposed. Because, indeed, there were too many blind spots in the current expedition map that could be the reason behind Drachma’s radio silence. She was using whatever instance of free time she had to explore every possibility and make a few modifications to the proposed route as well. Nothing could be left to chance, not with this.

Miles knocked on her door, making her stop tracing a line midway.

“Morning, General,” he said—his usual greeting, one that she did not return. He was coming in a bit later than usual, but she didn’t comment on that either. She felt there was no need to, he was an adult, he should know why he wasn’t on time.

Her posture—it didn’t escape him—was prominently more relaxed and casual than the one he’d grown used to in the past many years. He mentioned nothing to her and just approached his allotted seat.

“Working on anything new?” he asked as he took off his coat. Her office was warm still. Immediately, he leaned towards her desk to have a look at that which captivated her full attention. He’d only ever seen those maps down at Buccaneer’s department.

“Just some modifications for the route Buccaneer proposed. An extension to our current ones, if you will.”

“Sounds like a mouthful.”
“It is.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then. I’ve numbers to add up.” He meant to politely retreat into his chair but something caught his eyes. Aside from the map, there were several pieces of paper written in a handwriting he had learned to recognize with time: Zinnia’s. “Oh, you’ve… eh… new papers on your desk.”

“I thought I’d told you to mind your business about that,” Olivier said without looking up from her papers. “You and the captain, both.”

Miles pretended he hadn’t gotten reprimanded. He’d already put up with too much to care. She obviously wasn’t even angry at him, she was just busy with her own tasks, and happy as everyone had noticed she was now, there was no danger for them of having to spend two years in the cells by the boilers. Not that Miles should excuse his curiosity in that prevalent and apparent safety.

“Won’t you read them?” he asked.

“Want to come over and read them with me, Miles?” she said, exceedingly sweet.

“Really?”

Then her voice turned into stone, in her usual brisk remark: “No, Miles. Don’t be daft.”

“Pity, it looks promising.”

She did smile a little at that. “It always is.”

The idea of it, behind it all, was nothing but a promise. A promise and a gift. If someone had fallen from the sky months ago and told Olivier that one day, not much later, she would find what she was lucky enough to be living now, she would have sneered at them.

She didn’t get tastes of freedom or happiness, she just did her duty and served her country and tried to have no regrets when she went to bed at four in the morning. Her life hadn’t been her own, it shouldn’t be. But now it was. And she wanted to live it.

*Meeting you was like opening the door to a brand new planet.*

*And exploring you felt a bit like settling down on a hill by a lake under the sun. Extraordinary and like coming back home after a long day.*

*How can you do both? How can I let you?*

*I wonder, too, if I was a planet or just a piece of rock floating around you.*

When Olivier finished this and went downstairs and saw Zinnia again, she would actually let go of all uneasiness and just say what she’d thought upon reading those words this morning: *If I’m a planet, you’re the star that keeps me warm.*

She had never in her life said anything so corny. She could always unsweeten it with a bit of her usual grumpy side, and Zinnia would be as happy as a child during their first snow.

Olivier smiled to herself now.

Anything made that girl happy, her part to play in it was delightful to take on.

“Hey, are you about done with that?” Miles asked, pointing at the document she’d been drafting and
almost finishing up on.

“Yes, what do you need with it?”

“Oh, it’s not for me. I saw Buccaneer downstairs. He complained about needing the new budgets for something.”

She passed Miles the document, imagining that to that sentence Buccaneer had added a few real complains about how long it took her to have them all done and signed.

“Get it down to him, then,” she said. And she remembered to add: “Please.”

Miles let out a tiny smirk, complacent, but he did as he was told.

Everything was slowly going back to normal, and at least he, like the rest of them, was hiding his absurd fixation on her personal life. There wasn’t anything in that life that would interest them, but Olivier had no doubt that they’d find it funny—her sudden and brief softness and the words that had left her mouth and how she became completely unable to think straight. Not to mention the look on her face when a conversation turned her entire world around, and it didn’t have to be a particularly meaningful one. They would all enjoy themselves immensely if they could see her try and act tough when deep down she couldn’t even think.

Once she was left alone, it was inevitable that she finally leaned back on her chair and sighed. It’d been a long couple of hours of pretty much the same old routine that tired her eyes and made her back ache, so she stretched a little, still a bit numb after a long night of many sharing a bed that was too small for two.

And she remembered the conversation, too.

She had no idea how she could scurry an entire bed into this fort without it raising suspicion. She didn’t think she could deal properly with hundreds of men eyeing her curiously as she dragged the devilish mattress up the stairs into her room.

That would clear things up. For good.

Eventually, though, they’d find out anyway. But… did it have to be in such a crass manner? Couldn’t she just round them up and tell them?

No, I’m not their mum, she told herself. She was behaving like one, anyway. A mother who is afraid to tell her kids that she’s seeing someone after having left her spouse.

Slowly, very very slowly—and watching the door so Miles couldn’t barge in, oblivious, and catch her red-handed—Olivier picked up the phone and rang North City.

If the men had to find out their boss was sharing a room—and all that may entail—with the civilian who couldn’t cook and liked to pick small fights through the delivery of a huge (because, honestly, Olivier wasn’t going to buy any normal bed) mattress, then so be it.

I will love you gently, because I know that appearances hide the spark of fragility in you.

I will love you kindly, because the world out there is not kind and it has weathered too many a storm upon you, even if you never thought to call them storms.
I will love you slowly, because we live in a world that flies past our reaches too fast, and we live and die in a heartbeat. Our houses are passed on to new generations, our fields plowed by new owners of the land, our borders kept safe by new waves of soldiers, and our stories may only remain in the words we wrote to one another. I will love you slowly, because if it all is gone before we even learn to treasure it, I won’t let you go before it’s time.

And I will love you ardently, because I waited too long to even be able to write those words.

When Olivier finally left the office around lunch time, her good humor had slowly but surely returned. She was hearing Miles hum a silly old pirate song under his breath that Buccaneer had probably gotten into his head, and she didn’t flinch or think of asking him to stop. She welcomed the lively tune of it, it matched with her heart. Spring had come to the Ice Queen’s heart, and what could she possibly do about a thawing heart?

Miles had been right about Zinnia’s last piece of art, it had been promising. Very much so. Enlightening, as well. And … perhaps even moving, to some extent.

And gay, so terribly gay Olivier wanted to press that piece of paper against her chest and never let go. Something so blatantly not straight, something that bold and challenging wouldn’t have been allowed to exist in her world, for the sole fact that she would have been too embarrassed to let it. Now she knew other people had their eyes on it, waiting to read what came next just like she did, and Olivier did not give a solitary single fuck.

Let them, a part of her thought. This is who I am through the eyes of a stranger turned lover. If they wanted gossip, let them feast until they can’t anymore.

The other part wasn’t as happy, but she decided to let that part overlook things a little. Some bits of her were thriving now because of that, the price seemed just to her.

She had an entire drawer filled with written portraits that she had received for free, through wind and tide and despite everything (convention, situational conflicts, her own blurry relationship with the author), and now she even had the promise of more. Promising, Miles had said. And he had been right to say it.

Today, like every day, coming down to have lunch got her heart beating more excitedly just by thinking of whether or not they’d run into each other again (Zinnia, not Miles; Miles was upstairs in her office finishing up on something). They didn’t always, although Olivier would be lying if she wasn’t adjusting her schedule so very slightly so that it would happen more often.

She always liked the conversations they had, even if they ended up being about possums or plants in Central or even the weather forecast. There was always much to discuss about the northern snowflake if one was in the right company.

Olivier’s smile suddenly materialized itself, fully grown, onto her face when she spotted Zinnia in the queue to get her rations for the day. She walked to her, grabbed her own tray, and the two of them went to sit together with a few others. No one seemed to think anything of it, it was normal for most at this point. Besides, Olivier had eyes for nothing else that wasn’t how ridiculously cute this girl could be without even trying.
How the hell she’d already written something, Zinnia had no clue about. She had no time to, literally. She was... highly solicited all day long and all night long, and if she wrote, she wrote hurriedly over dubiously smooth surfaces and in between tasks.

After lunch, today, she’d scribbled a quick something on a napkin, but she hadn’t had time to finish it because having lunch took priority and then Olivier had strung along and Zinnia had left the sentence unfinished until a good hour later, when she had to patrol for a while but the area she’d been assigned to was quiet as a tomb.

She’d smoothed out the napkin on her thigh and finished it, and as soon as she’d been satisfied with it, she’d waited for her shift to be over to take it up to Olivier’s office. Because caring about someone other than the usual clique finding it now seemed like something insignificant. What could they derive from it? The truth?

Before, she might have been offended that someone might have pointed out she liked the stuck-up general that ruled with an iron fist. Now? Whatever they said would probably be true, anyway. If she ever worried about it, she worried about people finding out and taking it all the wrong way. But she tried not to think about that. The satisfaction she got when she knocked on the door, walked in the office—Miles and Buccaneer present, as always—and saw Olivier’s ‘I have mail’ face compared to nothing else and would outshine the entire world.

“Hi,” Zinnia just said as she placed the carefully—and slightly wrinkled up—napkin under Olivier’s sign with her name and rank.

Then she walked right out with a huge smile on her face, knowing full well Buccaneer’s jaw had dropped to the very floor she walked on at the sight of what had just happened. Zinnia had just given him food for thought that would last a lifetime, and it showed, even if she wasn’t looking at him.

“New stuff, boss,” Buccaneer said once Zinnia had left.

“New stuff, yes,” Olivier replied, nursing a warm cup of coffee and repressing a chuckle. This man got even more ridiculous by the minute. He looked exactly like he had ages ago, on Olivier’s first snow as more than just an officer, when she had made the biggest snowball and hadn’t hesitated to throw it at his back. Up until then, he’d been the champion snowballer, and she had stolen his title right under his nose. If Olivier could have chosen any descriptor for him in this moment, that would have been it. His surprise and embarrassment were obvious.

But, of course, he had a dangerous glint of pride in his eyes as well, especially when he conspicuously leaned in towards the napkin and squinted, trying to read it in his humongous height.

“This one’s the best one yet,” he said. “Aren’t you going to...?”

“They’re for me,” Olivier said. “I read them before you two do, even if you think you outrun me most of the time.”

“Hey, I never said I think we outrun you.”

“It’s come up in conversation more often than not,” Miles added to incriminate him.

Olivier now did stare at Buccaneer, impassively.

“Anything else?”

“No, that ... that was all.”
“Good,” she said, getting back to the reading she was patiently doing.

“Enjoy your coffee,” he grumbled before he turned around to leave.

“I certainly will,” she replied. And this time it was his turn to repress a chuckle or two. He’d had his suspicions about things having worked out in many a way since Zinnia had stayed, but the fact that now she delivered her writings directly to Olivier’s hand (or almost) without batting an eye or that they’d been seen together a few times, although nothing had been too off the charts, or that Olivier herself seemed to have ditched her usual demeanor made Buccaneer suspect that, indeed, his plans to do more than just reconcile two souls at war had worked out perfectly.

Buccaneer squealed. Actually squealed. Like one of those toys who remained more or less silent until you squished it at the right places. Miles had only heard Buccaneer be as vocal about his excitement a couple of times in his life, and he knew it couldn’t be stopped now.

Thankfully, no one else was in the office at the moment to judge.

“This is like Christmas,” Buccaneer said, sniffing the tears away. He’d only just read it to himself a couple of times, but the last paragraph Zinnia had left behind had moved him to bits, like he hadn’t spent weeks reading Olivier’s treasured collection behind everyone’s backs. “It’s so different from the rest of the stuff.”

“Yes,” Miles said, arms crossed. “It’s private.”

“You’ve read it.”

“And I keep my opinions to myself.”

“Miles…”

“What?”

The second Miles looked up at him, he regretted it. Buccaneer had the eyes of a fifteen-year-old who’s just been spoken to by their greatest crush, only his crush wasn’t one per se, just someone else’s story that he got to follow intensively through words.

Someone did definitely have to get Buccaneer a heavy pile of magazines to distract him from other people’s feelings or his own would end up flooding the fort. How could he be so dramatic and not fall apart from the contradiction? Miles thought.

“They’re in love,” Buccaneer said gently.

“Oh, for the love of—”

“They really are, Miles. She left it on Olivier’s desk right in front of us. Did you see her face? Their faces. I saw their faces. I see something in there we were only scratching the surface of.”

Miles sighed.

“Love, huh? You know love now?”

“Well, it’s not like I’ve never cared for anybody,” Buccaneer grumbled. “We did this little thing because of her, didn’t we? Because we cared.”
“And because you were bored. And we thought she’d be... yeah, happy, maybe. She looks happy now.”

“They both do.”

“They look like they’re in love,” Miles finally agreed with him. There wasn’t any other expression for it. Regardless of whether or not the happy couple was displaying that happiness when together, to the pair of them it had become obvious that it transcended normal levels of joy. This was elation.

Buccaneer licked his lips and read out loud: “What’s going to happen? How is it going to? Will the snow ever stop falling? Do I want it to?”

“Just keep going,” Miles muttered angrily when Buccaneer paused to say something boisterous.

The captain continued, if only so he wouldn’t be aggravating Miles any more.

“What hides under it but more ice and snow? It may be cold at touch, but dig into its heart and it’s a sun. And I’m a girl of extremes, I don’t dislike either.” Buccaneer finished, voice a little dented at the edges after reading those words. Those words which elicited the highest emotional response yet in his heart. “I mean... There’s stuff and then there’s... stuff.” He cleared his throat. “Just hold on, listen to what follows.”

And he kept reading.

No instructions were needed now. They moved around each other, dodging attacks that should have hit their target, because they lived in each other’s heads and could predict their movements in battle. If only this had been a skill that remained after they left the gymnasium.

Olivier held back, because otherwise this would turn out to be another letting-off-steam session like with Mauser, and the purpose of this (aside from the obvious and not very professional one) was to train Zinnia so she could handle herself if it ever came to that. Olivier’s soldiers had already come here knowing how to use a few different weapons, all Zinnia had known was how to tear her opponent’s face if said opponent wasn’t too big, and Olivier was not about to let her face the definitely bigger threat of Drachma bare-handed. She wasn’t shielding her, either. If Olivier fell, Zinnia would be on her own. And that was more terrifying and frustrating than having to dial back a few moves so these sessions were still effective.

“Getting better, huh?” Olivier taint her when both their swords clashed.

Zinnia raised an eyebrow, her concentration made physical in her frown and the way her arms were tensed up to keep the sword where it was. She knew she would never outlast Olivier Armstrong and the brutality her arms could bring upon earth if unleashed, but she could still fend her off for a little while, distract her and—

“Just learning how to exhaust you,” she grumbled. For longer than she remembered, she’d wanted to win, to prove to herself and to Olivier that, indeed, she could do so much more than just survive. Her brain spurted a thousand ideas a second at her, her feet moved almost on their own accord and she twirled, keeping her sword up to defend herself, and its cold metal edge got lost in Olivier’s hair, but it grazed her temple and Zinnia immediately snapped out of it.

Panting hard, sword down, Zinnia asked:
“You okay?”

Olivier pressed two fingers to her temple, beneath the ever-permanent curtain of hair, and when she looked at her fingertips she saw they were stained by tiny droplets of red.

It wouldn’t have stopped her, but Zinnia immediately dropped the weapon and dashed to get the first-aid kid from one of the cabinets at the back.

“I don’t need it,” Olivier said when she realized what Zinnia meant to do.

The flower girl’s hand hovered over a box of band aids and some antiseptic.

“Are you sure?” she said. “You’re bleeding. I cut you, I’m sorry.”

With her other hand, Zinnia tried to slowly part the hair and at least see the damage, but Olivier’s fingers were quick to wrap around her wrist and stop her.

“It’s okay, just leave it.”

But Zinnia insisted.

Their eyes locked.

“Don’t.”

“Why not?”

There wasn’t really a reason. Zinnia had already been close to it many, many times, and Olivier had been fine with it at the time. Zinnia making her discovery while they were getting up or going to bed or anything along those lines would have ended up turning into a different conversation. Now there was guilt involved in both sides.

Olivier hadn’t exactly kept it hidden, but for the longest time she’d worn her hair the way she did so no one would know immediately.

She grunted, cursed under her breath, and combed her hair back with her fingers, rough against the crown of her head.

It exposed the scar, old and faint and slightly embossed, a memory of past times, past mistakes, and the future she was fighting to change.

“Happy now, flower girl?” she said. She’d always called her that in her head, because she’d had no other name for her at the time and it had stuck till the end, but now it was not meant endearingly. It stung to say it now.

Zinnia, though, didn’t look twice at the scar. She did what she’d wanted to from the beginning and just absorbed the remaining blood away from the new cut, a few inches below the old scar, then made sure it wouldn’t fester. She couldn’t wrap her head around the idea that a woman who cared so little about what people at large thought of her was intently hiding a scar of all things. It made no sense. She had other scars, scattered across her body, fainter even than this one and barely anything more important than a mole or a spot.

Then why hide this one? Why impair her vision wearing her hair the way she did in order to do so?

Then, when Zinnia was finally done, she put everything back in the kit and threw away the waste. Olivier still hadn’t moved when she walked back to her.
Can’t you just tie your hair into a ponytail?” Zinnia asked, cupping the other woman’s face. Her blonde hair made Zinnia’s exposed skin tickle. It was so long, it got everywhere, and when they fought it floated like a cloud around the two of them. In the mornings, it wasn’t that rare of an occurrence to wake up covered in a sheet of hair or to be lying atop it.

“Commoners don’t do ponytails.”

“Olivier,” Zinnia only said. And Olivier couldn’t help but be startled by it, because Zinnia only ever used her name so sparingly. She wasn’t even sure this wasn’t one of the first times she used it for effect—and it was working on Olivier better than any other words. In a way, it carried the same weight as reprimands when she’d been a child and all the power her parents had had had manifested in the verbalization of her full name.

And, like back then, Olivier had plenty to say that would challenge that power.

“It’s a sign of weakness,” she stated, crossing her arms. It was a defense mechanism, but it was one of the best. She was a tank against enemy fire. “That is the one thing I cannot show.”

“Oh, yeah, they will burn you at the stake.” Zinnia said. “For a scar that’s—What? A souvenir from the Drachman Wars?”

Olivier just nodded solemnly. A bit of debris from times when war had actually been fought, not tiptoed around; being in the wrong place at the wrong time; and now she had a scar for life. Tiny and insignificant, yet still a sign that even iron could get scratched. And that was the last thing she needed others to see in her, vulnerability. Even if it was ancient vulnerability.

Her other scars were in much less public spots—her calf, her thigh, the inside of her arm, her stomach—, and she didn’t give a shit about the only person who could see them seeing them.

But this one was out in the open unless she hid it, and it sang old songs about victory that came at the cost of losing.

“It’s never been a problem before,” Olivier just said.

“It might be,” Zinnia said firmly. Then, her voice turned somewhat softer: “And, to be honest? It’s a lame way to go. Because your hair got in the way.”

Her eyes shone gently, too. She wasn’t pressing the issue here, but Olivier just wanted her to, because she had many more explanations at the ready. She could still have some control in how this memory formed in both their minds.

It’s just a scar, she thought. It shouldn’t matter so much.

But, she’d found in her many years, often a thing that seemed little would always be embedded in things that were not.

That was what signified the danger she’d faced once, the danger that had made her the iron general she was, and the danger that still lurked around her domains, waiting to bring her people down and herself with it. She couldn’t let that happen, she couldn’t let them know there was a way she could be defeated.

For all anyone cared, she was an impenetrable wall, an undefeatable combatant.

Zinnia smiled all of a sudden.
“I can’t braid,” she said. “But Buccaneer looks like he does.”

Buccaneer sported a thin black braid himself, and it became hard to imagine he needed to ask someone for help in the mornings to rebraid it. He had to do that on his own. He should know how to braid, then.

Olivier glared at Zinnia. “I’m not going to ask him to teach me.”

Zinnia smirked. “I can ask him.”

“Your hair isn’t braid long.”

“I wouldn’t tell him it’s for me.” Zinnia grinned an awful, terribly awful grin.

“Well, you’re not telling him it’s for me.”

“Oh, yes, I am.” Zinnia giggled now. Then: “I’m not letting you lose again because of something as silly as hair.”

Olivier smirked in return, remembering why they were here in the first place. “True, you won.”

“Doesn’t count. I want my rematch.”

Then Zinnia grabbed her own sword right out of Olivier’s hands.

“It buries me, the snow. And I’ve found it’s not as cold as it may seem. In bigger quantities, it’s like a mantle of glistening white, and it warms you up slowly, reflecting the light of the sun within rather than the one shining in the sky. I don’t understand people who don’t like snow, now. It takes some getting used to, being around it, being surrounded by it, but once you’ve started to think the best of it, you never stop. I know I haven’t, and I don’t want to. Loving the snow, in a way, is like loving you. You cradle me late at night, like I am the daughter of the winter you’ve bound yourself to. And I melt for you in our shimmering spring.”

“Okay, yeah. That last part confirms everything.”

Buccaneer made incoherent happy noises like a kid in their first snowball fight.

“You happy?”

“Terribly.” He wiped a stray tear off from under his eye. “Have you ever read anything more beautiful, Miles?”

Miles smiled and shook his head as Buccaneer left the piece of paper where he’d found it.

He still had to manage his tears. A difficult task, since they seemed to pool in his eyes and blur his vision.

“You cradle me late at night, like I am the daughter of the winter you’ve bound yourself to,” Buccaneer repeated wetly. “I want to marry those words.”

“Tell Zinnia, I’m sure she’ll let you,” Miles chuckled.

“No need to be an asshole,” Buccaneer said, positively crying silently now, no matter how unusual
that was of him. “I’m not stoic like you.”

Miles wasn’t too sure that wasn’t a hidden stab at him instead of a compliment.

“You’re not… stoic,” Miles just repeated, laughing a little harder now. “You stand as a definition of stoic. Your picture is in the dictionary next to the word, Buccaneer. You’re stoic, and also really silly with stuff like this.”

“Well, then, stoically cry with me, come on. Don’t leave a man hanging.”

And Miles actually got up, reluctantly, because why was Buccaneer like that, and just hugged the mountain of a man, patted his back awkwardly, especially because he couldn’t reach very high.

“Better now?” Miles mumbled.

Buccaneer guffawed, his chest supporting Miles’s head. “Yeah, actually.”

“Now let’s pretend this never happened and that we never read this.”

“Oh, boy, that’s going to be hard, isn’t it?”

“It will be if you don’t stop crying,” Miles said, offering him a tissue.

Buccaneer took it.

There was no other sound around the shower facility other than that of Zinnia trying, and failing, to get her clothes out of her bag to leave them on the bench for after her shower. After what had been a training session she hoped wouldn’t repeat itself any time soon (as it turned out she wasn’t ready for what winning actually entailed), Olivier and her had headed down for their usual shower. Normally, the room would be crowded with people queuing to have a wash right before dinner, if their days had already been wrapped up, but today it was barren. And that explained why they’d both taken the best bench to leave their things at.

Zinnia’s hands were currently busy making room in her bag for the old clothes as well when suddenly the papers she’d gathered during the day poured out of the bag like an overflowing river. She tried to force them back in before Olivier saw, but she was quick to notice it and realize what it was.

“You carry them around?”

“No.” Now Zinnia tried to put them back into her pockets but they were wrinkled and being nervous only made it more impossible. Besides, Olivier had already seen. And Zinnia should not have been blushing this hard. Earlier today she’d just left one of those writings on her table in the presence of their matchmakers, but of course she was red in the face when Olivier had picked up on how many of those writings there actually were.

“Hiding them from me again?” Olivier teased.

“I’m not hiding anything, unlike others,” Zinnia said, finally pushing them all to the back of the bag and pretending the blush was from the heat of running water that presently wasn’t running. “I’m just… keeping them for later.”
Olivier finished carelessly unbuttoning her jacket and arched an eyebrow at her.

“I don’t know where you even find the time to write.”

Zinnia, at the moment, didn’t know how the hell she had functioning enough brain cells to write. The woman was just right in front of her, her waistline eye-level with Zinnia, and probably being all serious and nonchalant while it was having the opposite effect on Zinnia herself.

After Olivier leaned in, towering over her like she always did, and almost brushed her lips, Zinnia realized how intentional it had been and reminded herself to play smarter the next time.

Zinnia licked her lips and answered as if this wasn’t happening.

“Well, I, uh,” she said, “find that Buccaneer’s department is not very busy lately…”

It never was, and Zinnia now gave no shits about Buccaneer ever catching her red-handed. He probably read her stuff out of the corner of his eye.

“You write me those things while he’s there?” Olivier asked, surprised. She’d always had this idea in the back of her head of Zinnia languidly sitting next to a window, just thinking about bare skin and war. The mental image of her writing those profound things next to a man who would kill to have those things published uneased her a little.

Zinnia giggled, finally ready to play along as she put her hands on Olivier’s shoulders. Big, broad, wonderful shoulders. Then, she shrugged and said:

“I like the risk.”

Olivier leaned in a little more to whisper in her ear.

“Do you know what he’d do if he found you writing me naughty bits in between work?”

No one refuted the ‘naughty bits’. There was a reason for Olivier to lock the writings after she got them.

Meant as a threat as it was, though, Zinnia couldn’t help but smile at the thought. “He’d read them over to Miles when neither you nor I were looking. We’re their little experiment.”

“Bullshit,” Olivier said possessively. “I’m nobody’s experiment. My mess is my own.”

“Am I your mess?”

“You’re what I get messy for.”

“They read every single thing I write to you…” Of course, no one dared pretend as well that those things got written for any other reason than for Olivier to find and lose her dignity over.

It was the only thing she could do upon reading analyses of her own life through the lens of someone who she now could say she loved.

Gently, Zinnia stood up, bodies brushing against each other because Olivier would have rather to lose a war than move away, and took Olivier’s jacket off.

Then her black undershirt.

And then Zinnia herself undid a couple of buttons on her own jacket without looking away from
those big blue eyes that had been witness to carnage and beauty alike.

She wanted in into those eyes, she wanted to see the world through them. She wanted to feel life from behind them.

That was why she wrote, because the feelings lived within her, but her aspirations reached out a little further. And today she was lucky enough to be able to maneuver the winner of every fight she entered into a tiny corner by the empty shower.

“If I ever write about... moments like this,” Zinnia said, definitely taking control now, getting up to push Olivier against a wall, who immediately flipped her around without waiting for her to complain. Zinnia finished her sentence pinned against the tile. “They will read them. And this is out before we know it.”

Olivier pretended not to be looking around, trying to hear for the door opening and all those voices coming in, drowning the room in noise and Olivier’s own fear. She pretended to not be terrified of that happening at all.

*If someone comes now, it is out before I can scream them into secrecy.*

“I will be very much not gentle when I write about it...” Zinnia continued in a mutter. She was definitely letting go of many things right now, jacket on the floor, boots off.

“You’re not being gentle now, either,” Olivier noted.

“Trying to see if I’m a match for you...”

And Zinnia pushed her a little more. Public place, risk, writing. She might be the one against a wall, but the vulnerable one here wasn’t Zinnia. She wouldn’t go through the best of times if the whole fort found out *like this*, but she’d take it more lightly than Olivier would.

Olivier’s emotional response might change the world.

“Bullshit,” Olivier repeated again. “You’re trying to win.” And she definitely brushed Zinnia’s lips when she said that. “You like winning more than me.”

“That’s because you win a lot more.”

They kissed, and Zinnia backed down a couple of steps, hanging onto the bare waist of her partner as she accidentally activated the shower. Water just started falling over them, and neither moved.

Hadin’t they come here for a shower?

“I placed an order for a king’s size bed,” Olivier admitted, chest bared now under Zinnia’s hands, the lower half of her uniform wetter than wet. How they were going to get out of this predicament, neither knew. Whatever happened, they just had stopped caring when their hearts had leapt out of their chests into each other’s hand. The smell of risk and danger was in the air and for one second they liked it, for it smelled like wading in a spring pool as well. It was the perfect moment to like it. In any other place, they would have stopped. But today they couldn’t. And they didn’t dare.

“That’s... bigger than kissing in a public shower.” It came out like a tiny breath of breathless and surprise, yet it carried a wave of excitement about it. No one would be able to lie about why Olivier needed a bigger bed.

“It is. It’ll take a while to arrive but...” She paused to breathe for a moment, lips intermingled with Zinnia’s. “…it’s worth it. We have till then to figure something out.”
“Most of them know already,” Zinnia said, stopping for a moment to squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. “And they don’t care. No one is going to jail for this, especially not you. You’re the boss.”

And then her hands went back to Olivier’s waist. Higher than the waist, higher than just the stomach. Olivier’s breath hitched, but she pretended it hadn’t by trying to follow the conversation.

What had that last part been? Oh yes, boss…

“I’m the boss…” she muttered.

“Exactly. And if they have lives, so should you.”

“You’re my life,” Olivier asserted, because there was no doubt to be had. Her survival was the mountain and the snow and the sword she carried with her, her life was… the thawing of the ice, the first blooms of spring, and the little seed of emotion that Zinnia was watering without even knowing it.

“Don’t be so melodramatic. How long have I been ‘your life’? A couple of weeks? Aren’t you like forty?”

Zinnia laughed as Olivier started thinking. She seemed distant now, lost in her own mind, looking for understanding. She hadn’t been throwing it out of proportion, at least she didn’t feel like she might have. She gave things the importance they had, because at times it was hard for her to even realize that her life was important, and not only because her country required her to be.

Life hid in the small things that the bigger things could strip away from you any moment. And Olivier rather enjoyed that feeling of rushing through, then remembering to smell the flowers, look up at the blue sky and seeing more than just colors and clouds.

“Shower with me, flower girl,” she said.

Zinnia raised her eyebrow. “And if someone comes in?”

“Well, then the ordering a brand new bed will seem insignificant in comparison.”

Zinnia giggled. “Okay, then. Go big or go home.”

And so they got rid of the remaining clothes, that judging by their state of absolute wetness might as well have stayed on, and just washed the training session off their bodies.

When they were done, they sat in the bench, not really bothering to get completely dressed and not really thinking of what a jolly image that would be for whoever came in right that second (they cared less and less the longer they stayed in the showers).

They just made that bench theirs, wasting time and enjoying time. Dinner could wait.

And Zinnia softly parted Olivier’s curtain of hair so she could see the old scar again. As soon as her hair had dried a little, Olivier, ever slapdash, had styled it as she had for years, more out of habit than anything else. But it didn’t go unnoticed to Zinnia.

“You don’t need to hide it,” Zinnia said, “you’re human. That’s what we do, we get hurt. You’re not made of iron.”

“I’m not hiding.”
But Zinnia’s eyes told her the truth, that she was. That, in a way, hiding was very much a survival tactic around here. They all had secrets, big or small, and they all played their cards very close to the chest. If someone knew what your deepest secret was, didn’t that sort of gave them control over you?

If people found out that the most notorious general on Amestris soil was nothing but another woman, tired of fighting and hungry for war, who had lost dreams and people alike, things would inevitably change for her.

“I rather like it,” Zinnia said. “It’s like the dark side of the moon, I’ve never seen it before. And…” She smiled. “It makes your face look so round…”

Then Olivier just lay her head on Zinnia’s lap.

“I want you to see my round face.”

“I don’t know how to braid.” Zinnia reminded her.

But she tried anyway, then gently undid the mess with deft fingers and let Olivier thrive in her own shields for a little longer. No one needed to know, but these soldiers they shared a life with wouldn’t sneer at her for having been weak once.

They might not even notice it.

The thing about scars is that everyone is extremely self-conscious about one’s own, and yet we hardly seem to notice everyone else’s unless explicitly shown.

Tonight, already in the kitchens, they sat surrounded by people with secrets, just like theirs. People who liked people and stories they were afraid to tell and days they hoped would never come.

Zinnia helped Olivier with the trays and they sat down, as always, in the first table they saw with two vacant seats. They did that, now, they went together, because they might as well. The day separated them, the night joined them.

And it just felt normal, and cozy, being in public—careful not to overindulge in the feeling and accidentally incite a thousand thousand new rumors—and having their chests hold in a breath or two at the thought of the men around them noticing something and knowing something.

Even so, the chatter around them, with the soldiers saying hello to one another and sharing the stories of the day like the two of them did, whispered a welcome. The kind of welcome that you feel when coming home.

And Olivier and Zinnia were too caught up in the home between their unlaced fingers to notice that now.
Mauser got up fairly early in the mornings so he could be one of the first to have some quiet along with his coffee. Whoever had just finished on their shift drank in tomb-like silence, ready for bed, and following the fort’s schedule almost nobody deemed it necessary to rise a few hours sooner than normal just to grab a fully unoccupied table.

Mauser did it, because he enjoyed the contrast between Briggs’ usual chaotic energy and how enticingly still everything was when most of its inhabitants were still snoring their dreams away in the dorms, and because if he slept on a little longer he’d find himself queuing for breakfast and running late. He preferred to get up before the sun and just get going, if he could. Major Miles’s schedules tended to make that impossible some days, but today was not a day that Mauser needed to be especially present in the worst, most demanding of tasks, so he was just sitting in one of the lounge rooms—the one that still had a semi-functioning coffee machine—waiting for the energy to face the new day, which usually came at lunch, when the day has halfway done.

Finishing the last of his bitter coffee, he heard a knock on the door, and then a sheepish face peek in and immediately express relief at having found another human being at the crack of dawn.

“Good morning, sir,” the newcomer said, sporting a quiet and polite smile in spite of the early hour. Mauser shook his head at the mention of ‘sir’, it certainly had been a while since someone had addressed him thus. “I’ve a package for the general assigned to this fort. Where could I find her to make my delivery?”

“She’s—uh—” He had no idea how to word ‘she’s still asleep, probably, and will be for a while’ without making it sound as undignified as it was. Who even delivered packages at six in the morning? “I’ll fetch her for you,” he said, regretting it as soon as it was out. But someone would have to do it, better him than a poor delivery boy who’d probably not slept much if he was here already all the way from North City. “You can wait here, if there’s anything you need signed.”

“Yes, actually,” the man said, taking a seat. “Thank you.”

Mauser tried not to think about how today was not his day and how he had definitely not helped make it any less easy on him. What could this delivery possibly be? He wondered about it. Not many things got delivered so early in the day, and certainly none of the staples came in such a fashionable individualistic manner. This had to be something personal and he should definitely ignore the pang of curiosity sitting on his chest, mostly because being curious about it could only get him in trouble. You didn’t pry into the life of those who led you and you did not judge it if you accidentally found out about something that went on in it, Mauser had learned it on his first day, when Olivier had taught him the exact kind of unforgiveness she lived by. Time later, as well, he’d discovered how little she actually meant that and how much effort she put into being who everyone else thought her to be. It was a strange equilibrium of facades and roles that everyone learned in the end. It was their lives, after all.

He stood before her door, once he’d found it, and tried not to feel like that twenty-something kid who’d been sent to the north, a land he didn’t know and a land he’d been told ate you alive for breakfast. He was a man who had fought the general herself and been on the brink of winning more than once, and he just wanted his peace and quiet today.
He knocked twice and twice the silence answered. He wasn’t sure what the next step was, he wasn’t even sure the general kept her door locked at night—and she probably should, so maybe she did—and he wasn’t about to bring it down with a hard slam of his shoulder.

In the end, he tried for the handle and found that, indeed, she hadn’t locked it. The floor creaked as he pushed the door open, careful not to make any more noise, and he could barely breathe without feeling guilty. For some reason, he was terrified of waking her before he meant to.

He walked towards the bed, trying not to trip in the dark, and then he noticed all of a sudden that his boss was not alone in the bed. His heart almost leapt out of his chest and then began to beat so fast he thought for a moment that was it.

He had literally irrupted one of those scenes Buccaneer and company liked to brag about having been witness to, and he had no wish at all to keep seeing the scene unfold. The rumors were true, and the rumors were bland in comparison to reality. The two stars of Briggs’ freshest gossip did not only share a certain feeling of kinship but a bed. No one had dared dream of this, and now he had the proof—just not the guts to make it official among the men. If Olivier turned on the bed right now, awake, he’d be caught staring.

He had to act now.

Gently as he could, and trying not to touch the sleeping woman beside his boss, he shook Olivier’s shoulder.

“General,” he called in a whisper. “Sorry to wake you,” he said, “but there’s a man downstairs who has something for you.”

He felt Olivier take a patience-gathering breath, then she opened her eyes at him.

“What has this place become? A tavern for messengers?” she muttered.

“No, sir, I…” Mauser tried to say. “It seemed urgent.”

“I’ll be right down. Tell him to wait.” She roused slowly—he imagined she did it so she wouldn’t wake Zinnia accidentally. Mauser would probably die of shame if that happened. “Can you do that?”

“Yes, of course,” he said.

“Then don’t just stand there and go,” Olivier ordered, as kindly as she could. It was too early and the slight throbbing in the front of her head confirmed it, she must have slept around three hours, and now the day had just begun, demanding her presence.

All it took was a quick signature, letting the delivery boy take a coffee, which he drank mostly out of complacency, and then everyone who was already awake had decided to come snoop. These men were thirsty for distractions, and the last thing she needed was to have them feast on them while she herself struggled to even consider this new stage in her life a distraction.

The mattress was. A huge one, too. A magnificently huge distraction for everyone to see. And they were seeing it, gaping at it wide-eyed like they had never seen a mattress big enough for two people. Not here, they hadn’t. There were no rules about who could sneak out in the middle of the night to sleep with who, just as there were no king-sized beds. If someone wanted to share a bed with someone else, they would just have to make do with what they had.
They… Olivier had never felt so ungrateful for not being part of that ‘they’. The stares felt like hellfire against the back of her neck as the delivery boy took off and left her with a mattress to publicly haul up on her shoulder and carry all the way up to her room. If she’d planned it, it could not have turned out to be any more embarrassing.

But she had no choice. She’d made her bed, now she had to lie in it. No matter the cost, no matter whose avid eyes were happily spying over her actions, looking for a loophole that wasn’t a loophole, something to exploit, something to lust over. And she couldn’t blame them. Even from her perspective, just standing there, next to a mattress that would barely fit in her room, counted as hilarious. And she would have laughed if she hadn’t been in the center of it.

“Need a hand?”

“The fort needs a hand. You’re loitering. Move,” she just said, and started to part the crowd, a woman and a mattress. It made it easier that way, the gatherings of men just moved to the side, and she pretended they weren’t there.

When the doors of the elevator closed, she let all of her air out.

“Why did this have to happen when everyone can see?” she whispered to herself.

The next thing she’d know, there would be a paper in her desk one morning about her relationship with a nobody from nowhere, and everyone would already be doing what they’d excelled at for fifteen years: writing about her personal life as if it mattered, covering every single thing she’d done for the country in gossip.

And she’d just have to deal. Dealing was part of the job, and the part of it that mattered less.

She could still feel the eyes observing her, from the stairs, the corridors, the people walking around her floor like they had never seen her before.

She dragged the beast of a mattress all the way to the door, and she just kicked it open, placing the mattress against the wall and making sure it stayed upright, then she walked in.

*Hello, I'm back. I know it's early but our Achilles’ heel has just arrived from North City. Please never let me make a decision like this ever again,* she would have said. But she was a stoic woman, strong and of sound mind. She could handle this without whining like a Central soldier.

Zinnia was caught sitting up on the bed, her face twisted into an adorable expression that perfectly conveyed how little she liked getting up in the mornings. She saw the huge mattress resting against the door frame and her face changed completely.

“Oh, shit,” she just said, and she needn’t have said more.

“It’s here.”

Olivier pulled at it to get it through the door but it didn’t bulge one bit, and Zinnia certainly had no hopes of it getting into the room any time soon. She doubted it might even fit through the frame *and* in the limited space they had.

She quickly pushed the covers away and stood up to help.

“Wait,” she said, gesturing to give Olivier indications. “Push it back out, and then I’ll try and pull from here.”
Olivier did as told, backing out slowly.

“Right, now,” Zinnia said, grabbing the edge of the mattress that protruded into the room. “I got it. Ready?”

They had to fumble for a bit, because the mattress was slightly taller than the door, but it worked and once it was in it fell against Olivier’s desk.

She walked in, too, to reassess the damage. Nothing had been broken, apparently. That table of hers was sturdy.

Without a second thought, the both of them automatically set to taking care of the smaller bed they wouldn’t be using now. It was pushed and dismantled to the opposite corner of the room, where it barely even fit, and with one last effort, the two panting woman pushed the new mattress to its final location and then looked at each other for a moment or two.

Zinnia just dropped down on the mattress, exhausted, and gave Olivier a very concrete (and not as seductive as she meant it to be) look from there, smoothing the surface of their new bed with the back of her hands and her knuckles.

Olivier sighed, not appearing as fed up with it as she meant to, and cornered her against the flat surface of the bed.

“There was so little space in the room now, it was barely a square with a mattress on a corner of it, taking all the spotlight in its bumpy and soft surface. We both looked at it, like we look at each other, and we knew we’d end up closing the door behind us, isolating the mattress and us from the rest of the fort. Even if it was just for a moment or two. It would be enough. A moment is enough, against the backdrop of hours we’ve spent pretending not to long for something else. A moment was enough the second we touched the mattress, ours the same way this whole place is yours to command and mine to experience. A moment is enough now, when my words echo the touch of your fingertips on my collarbone and my hands on your waist, and your hair brushing against my chest, and my lips murmuring words that are only yours to hear. Like this mattress is ours.

“Listen, I’m going to have to take a day off.” Buccaneer said right after he’d finished reading it out loud for Miles to hear. In spite of the many, many times they’d been advised to stay away from this stuff, they both kept coming back—and Buccaneer knew that Miles enjoyed it. “Zinnia keeps reinventing herself. Who said she can’t write? She can. And she works wonders at it. I need to ask her to write me a piece sometime… about me.”

“Keep reading. In silence. Please.”

“I can’t read if I’m in silence, though…” He chuckled.

“You know what I mean. Come on.”

Buccaneer was immensely pleased, of course. Slowly but surely Miles was regaining his interest in gossip, and he was proud of having been the one to teach him the ways of it. Time… and time again, truth be told.

Suddenly, Miles squealed. He’d kept on reading when Buccaneer had interrupted. His squeal was an
odd noise to be aware of, because it didn’t exactly sound like a normal squeal, it sounded as if someone had stepped on his toes. His voice remained the same, just… strained.

“What? What is it?” Buccaneer pressed it.

Miles gulped. “Keep reading.”

Buccaneer did, scanning the page at the speed of light for what came after the moment and the mattress. Then his eyes opened as wide as they never had, and after half a year of these things existing right under his nose, that was saying something.

He gave a shrill yell, and in that moment Miles regretting his entire existence.

“I need a minute,” Buccaneer said, appropriate the mood of the scene by sitting dramatically on his boss’s chair like he wouldn’t shake in fear of getting told off because of it. “I can’t believe they’ve had sex.”

Miles glared at him, but Buccaneer could tell he was a little shocked still. It made no sense to pretend that it was big news. They might all at some point have imagined, daydreamed about the relationship and its progress, but there was a stretch between that and plain old picturing them… in compromising situations.

Even so—

“I can…” Miles mumbled. And he didn’t dare doubt that Buccaneer, despite all his bulky personality and his lewd jokes, had not considered this in the slightest, being too focused on the formal parts of it and the repercussions on Olivier’s usually terrible mood.

“No, I mean, obviously I can imagine. But…” And then Buccaneer made incoherent blabber noises. “She wrote about it. She left it here, and not exactly for Olivier to read this time. I mean…” He smirked. “Zinnia could just tell her in person.”

“They have this going on, we won’t be the ones to discourage it. I just… yeah, this was clearly a declaration of intentions, of sorts.”

“This is like putting it up on the corkboard downstairs.”

“Exactly,” Miles agreed. He was red in the face now. Maybe he was the one who had trouble with this sort of stuff, especially since his crush on the general hadn’t entirely faded in the past decade or so. “Well, not quite. But… if this is here, it’s because she no longer cares about hiding.”

“Could you imagine?” Buccaneer laughed. “Having to hide from having a life?”

“Says the man who has a chance at one in less than a year and can’t bother finding accommodation for it.”

“Miles, we’re discussing something important here. Plus, I’m building a house, we’ve talked about this before. Come on, focus. They do want us to know.”

“Or Zinnia does. Would Olivier, in her right mind, allow for us to read something so intimate?” Miles pondered.

Buccaneer looked all the more excited now. He definitely had a knack for getting into messes like this one, and he definitely enjoyed finding out about forbidden things.
“She doesn’t know this is here yet,” he crooned.

“I can’t stand around and wait to find out. We need to disperse.”

“You can’t disperse, you work here,” Buccaneer said, matter-of-factly. “And I can’t either, I’m here to ask her about something important. My route needs approval once and for all and this woman just won’t give it.”

Miles heard footsteps coming and his heart almost stopped in his chest. The day could still get better, apparently. If it wasn’t her, then someone else would probably find out about what had happened, because he was sure Buccaneer wouldn’t be able to keep his excitement to himself. If it was… He’d better not think about that.

Quickly as he could, Miles returned to his desk, feigning to be busy with something. When he looked up, the footsteps were louder still and Buccaneer still had the piece of paper in his hand.

“At least stand away from the desk to pretend you know nothing,” he hissed at Buccaneer.

“At this point, Miles, who cares?”

“But, silently, Miles just had to agree with him. This had all gotten so crazy there was no reason to stay caught up, you would be caught up eventually.

Olivier’s steps grew louder on the wooden floors until she irrupted into the room like a storm—a content, powerful storm that could crush the two of them in her hand or pardon them like she already had in many an occasion. It no longer felt like being trapped to Miles (because to Buccaneer it had always been a game he could win), but more like routine.

She came in, didn’t greet him, and watched them quietly as she took her usual seat. What on earth is wrong with them today? Of course, she knew they were probably just idle right now, hanging out like two teenagers, like the newbies tended to the first few months. But it bothered her, barely enough to constitute a problem, yet slightly.

Then she saw the gift this morning had made for her.

One quick look and she settled that she would definitely need to hide Zinnia in her room for the rest of both their lives. She would hide if need be.

Now she knew why those two men were so idly hanging around her desk, like they couldn’t be hovering around Miles’s desk instead.

Her eyes barely skimmed the few pages Zinnia had written. When has she even had time to write this and leave it here for me? Zinnia’s efficiency regarding this was a secret she didn’t even think she wanted to unravel.

Then she blushed like she never had before at the sight of certain phrases that weeks ago would not have made it into her daily collection of words.

Oh dear god and these two have read it, haven’t they? She might as well just parade it around now, then. This was the equivalent of directly grabbing Buccaneer on the side after the mattress… incident, and whispering to his ear that she’d slept with her girlfriend that morning.

Glorious, magnificent, fabulous. At least now they knew for real and didn’t need to fumble for
confirmation—not that Olivier wasn’t hoping she still had to officially give them all one. Eventually, though. Very eventually. After this, she was going to try and be less seen, even.

“Don’t just stand there,” Olivier said, acting more firm and normal than she felt. She needed a vacation—she hadn’t had one in fifteen years, but she sure would take two days off right now, if only to not have to think about the butterflies she had as second-in-command, fluttering by hoping to catch some juicy news to live off. “Tell me, you must have strong opinions by now.”

Buccaneer fell for it. As per usual.

“Oh, I’m seriously considering commissioning her, she is a dedicated writer. And she has a special talent for sentimental scenes.”

Olivier stood up, her face pink like the sunset.

“What do I have to do,” she said slowly, “so you’ll both stay away from my private belongings? I will do it, I will spare no expense.”

“At this point, nothing could really work,” Miles said, still shocked. “There’s talk everywhere. This… escalates a little, but so far only we have seen.”

“Is that supposed to be comforting?” she said, biting.

“No…” Miles said.

Buccaneer chuckled.

“She nailed you, boss,” he said. “Those descriptions of you as the ‘sturdy mountain in her way’.” He laughed again. “Totally picture it that way.”

“Oh, she nailed me alright,” Olivier let out, going for an icy tone that sounded more like anger in a process of repression. “Fuck, I should not have said that…” she muttered right away. She honestly couldn’t believe the absurdity of it all. She and Zinnia had spoken—briefly and lightly—about a future in which people… knew. But this went beyond people knowing. And the way she saw it, the solutions were as followed: buy a lock and give Zinnia the key to leave her writings inside, get Zinnia to stop writing, not give a shit who read those writings.

And she liked neither.

Taking a deep and, she hoped, calming breath, Olivier said:

“You’re going to leave this room now, sworn to secrecy, or you’ll be doing dishes till the day Drachma attacks, and we’re all going to forget this happened.”

She could see in Buccaneer’s mind: I’m pretty sure Zinnia won’t.

But it was out of her hands now. They would keep quiet, because despite their insistence on being up to date on what happened in her life, they didn’t go around sharing the information to its smallest detail. But it definitely was at a level now that no one could control. The gossip had grown into many realities, each person saw things a different way, and the truth of it was complex to accurately portray in a retelling of events.

It was what it was. An experience, a challenge, and a dream. After Ianthe, after the sacrifice she’d made, Olivier had not believed for one second something like this was possible for her. Until it’d been smashed against her chest and she’d knelt to pick it up before it reached the ground. Such a
precious thing… and maybe the choice to share it as it was was the last choice she had, because sharing it in general was already happening.

In the minds of gossip-drawn Buccaneer and shy Miles, in the minds of young Austin and terrified Mauser. In the minds of everyone, Olivier was no longer made of unwavering ice. The remaining ice of her wept.

Her spring was here.

That night, as promised, she’d almost forgotten about it. Olivier got lost in words more easily now that ever before. She clung to them and then let them go, slippery between her fingers, to focus on those that came next, hungry to be believed.

These moments before bed were the true mirror of what she harbored in her heart, the inability to be who she was and a desire to become that the second the door to the room was closed. She had plenty to improve, and she had plenty to say.

She wanted to… somehow understand how these things worked when they were long-term. Whatever she’d had in the past that she’d thought would last hadn’t, and she’d been left with nothing, a big emptiness in her chest and in her arms. Olivier had it all now.

She just had to fit all the pieces of her life together and had to find a way to fit Zinnia’s in her own life too. Wasn’t this what building a relationship was like? Just completing a puzzle of two different experiences, two different minds and bodies that had agreed on being one?

They sat on the mattress because it was still too early to go to sleep, and they interrupted each other in the telling of their stories.

There was a bit of everything in those stories. Adventure and boredom, people who had brought kindness and people who had turned their days bitter, wars and times of peace, and memories that were still present in their minds and would probably always be.

You didn’t just forget what had turned you into you.

And, of course, the mattress came up. Because it was too obvious a truth to be sitting on.

“If you hadn’t stolen my brain and replaced it with mush, I might still be able to bring a proper reprimand to their doors, order them to shut up, or… to be less begging, find something that will keep them busy—especially the captain.”

She had a few ideas on the matter, she just had no clue how to act on any of them without getting caught. Whatever went on in her office ended up being common knowledge to Miles, and eventually would get passed down to Buccaneer himself. And he wouldn’t hesitate to add that to the permanent teasing. It seemed to Olivier that this… throwback to feelings had inspired the captain to return to his old practices when she’d been but a new recruit surrounded by Briggs bears.

“I didn’t do anything to your brain, you did that on your own,” Zinnia said, repressing a chuckle.

“There has to be a better explanation as to why I’ve become the version of me that… that didn’t care about breaking the mold loudly.”

Zinnia tsked. “Haven’t you been doing that for the past many years? You’re the master of it. When
people need help ignoring other people’s opinions, it’s you they look to.”

“I’m still blaming you,” Olivier said anyway. “If you hadn’t moved north—”

“Unluckily,” Zinnia said, humorous, “I have.”

“Very unluckily.” And they both had no doubts that this was like one of those things very mushy people said, which deep down really hid an ‘I love you’ more than anything else. Neither of them could think of this little situation of many combined factors as unlucky.

“Maybe we should just find you a hobby,” Zinnia said. “You’ll be distracted enough to stop caring about other people’s.” She laughed now, because… the last thing she could picture in her mind was Olivier Armstrong finding a hobby. She imagined her knitting by a fire or frowning as she tried to understand a philosophical theory everyone gave up on. The day Olivier got a hobby, the universe would have folded in on itself and become a parody.

Olivier, though, didn’t think of a proper hobby to entertain herself because the concept as such had been erased from her mind, but she immediately thought back to alkahestry and the unsolvable mystery of where all the information had gone and … was she really going to have to go to Xing herself to find out? Was that even a thing she could do? She didn’t ask Zinnia, it wasn’t something that needed to be out in the open. She immediately canceled the hypothetical trip in her mind, though, she had a fort to man and a girl to please.

“Hacking people with the sword doesn’t count,” Zinnia went on, untiring. “Cards? Does anyone actually play cards here?” She hadn’t seen anyone gathering around doing that. The national sport here was gossip and coffee. “Books? I have books, I could lend them to you.”

“I’ve a whole library at my disposal.” Olivier arched her eyebrow and crossed her arms, which owing to her horizontal disposition was a thousand times funnier than as usual.

“Yeah, and you’ve also had fifteen years to read through it all, and you probably have. You could pick up the habit. I’m sure I’ve titles you’re not familiar with.”

Olivier could not understand why Zinnia had any interest in sharing her books with her.

“I’ve also taken a look at your… titles. Not my choice of reading material.”

“Nitpicky, are we?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t know. What did you used to do when you weren’t here?”

When she was young, and had free time and cities to wander in, and people to ferociously kiss in dark alleys…

Olivier couldn’t help raising the eyebrow again, making Zinnia blush at the realization that there had been more than just kisses in those alleys.

“Okay,” Zinnia settled it, “not that.”

“Occasionally that.”

“We’re talking hobby here, something I’m not needed for.”

“…I’ve a few ideas in mind myself,” Olivier commented, biting down on an impolite smirk.
“And can I hear about such fantastic ideas?”

“No.”

Chapter End Notes

At this hour, and after two weeks of a LOTR marathon, I am prompted to quote Gandalf: “A wizard is never late. Nor is he early; he arrives precisely when he means to.”

But I would also like to add, in light of this quote, that I totally forgot to post the chapter today because I was finishing up on Chapter 57 already and got super excited about that. Never trust a writer to post in time, that is my wisdom for today XD
“You’re really not going to tell me what you’re planning to do with your free time?” Zinnia teased. It had been going on since the night before, and she really was not going to drop it for the life of her. Watching Olivier pretend this wasn’t bothering her was worth everything. She did this thing where she just looked around, as if bored, and had this air to her as if none of it affected her. But her ears gave her away: they were red at the tips. “Is it work? Are you not telling me because it’s work?” Then Zinnia whispered, stabbing her fork in the air at her: “Or are you not telling me because we’re in public?”

Olivier smirked calmly. “Perhaps I just like keeping you in the dark.”

Zinnia leaned back on the bench. Olivier was absolutely capable of such a thing. She sure loved her secrets, the little things she wasn’t saying, even when they were so obvious, there in midair, grabbing at her. Zinnia didn’t know how Olivier managed to stay away from her own secrets, but she wasn’t about to ask. It was funnier to just gently coax it out of her.

“Yeah, right. What dark?” she said. “Give me two hours to study your face and I will tell you what you’re planning.”

If only it was so easy, but Zinnia was convinced this was something silly enough that wouldn’t take too long to guess. After all, the number of things one could do in this fort to fend off boredom wasn’t precisely high. Mostly exercise and reading—stop counting.

“Unless you want to come up to the office with me and risk having someone see you sitting on my lap—”

“Doesn’t sound like a bad plan…” Zinnia muttered, laughing.

“—otherwise I can’t give you two hours. Might have to do with two minutes. Before everyone comes in.”

But ‘everyone’ was already here, they just weren’t paying attention. The few soldiers who had started on their early mornings and earl gray tea seemed to be more interested in other things, which was… unusual in them. Maybe it was just too early for anyone to care about anything that wasn’t complaining about being up and the coffee being cold. Even if that ‘anything’ might be something as overt as the only two women in the fort being everything but subtle.

Zinnia quit eating, threw her growing hair back and blinked flirtily. She was slowly getting more and more confident when it was time to flex her flirting muscles. It’d been a nice road of discovery for Olivier, who up until recently had really thought herself mad for being so desperately attracted to someone who couldn’t be clumsier at the arts of seduction.

“Are you saying I have permission?” Zinnia said.

“I’m not going to oppose to it,” Olivier said, just as calmly. She played it as if none of this had anything to do with her, when in reality her brain was already plotting around it, to see how much she could give up without Zinnia realizing it, “if that’s what you mean, no.”

“You like to be seen, don’t you?” Zinnia commented. And she was already staring, drinking details
in and sucking her breath in too because the crush feelings were present once again, making her feel like static inside, like when you lost feeling in your toes. Not a day went by that she didn’t feel a bit like the woman who had first arrived in the north, lost and underdressed.

She spent a minute watching Olivier now, allowed to and not ready to ever give that up, ransacking her brains.

“You’re going back to using the punch bag,” Zinnia stated.

“No,” Olivier said.

“You’re going to … take up writing because you’ve seen how well it performs when it’s time to express feelings?”

Olivier hardly managed to muffle a chuckle. “No.”

“Knitting?” Zinnia was running out of options, but she still had no idea if she was getting warmer. What was a hobby to the woman that didn’t have any?

“Why the hell would I knit?” Olivier replied, laughing as well. The idea was nothing but hilarious. It was a pastime that people took up in their old age, to keep their digits mobile, but her? What use could she have for knitting, other than overthinking about patterns and not about work?

“What do I know?” Zinnia said. “It’s cold, isn’t it? You could knit yourself a scarf.”

“I don’t wear scarves.”

“Too pretty a neck to hide it?” Zinnia asked, raising her eyebrow.

“For once, spot on.” Olivier smirked again, pleased. She was not in the mood for denying that it felt good to receive compliments in the exact circumstances that she shouldn’t, right in the heart of long ears and longer tongues. But she didn’t care much.

This, while dangerous, made her heart beat faster and entertained her mind far better than any so-called hobby might.

Zinnia pressed on, fishing more options out of nowhere, untiring. She was so lost, the poor thing. It was almost endearing. Olivier was almost deciding to postpone breakfast and just hide in some room and let that endearment swirl around her like the wind on top of the wall.

“Are you … going to, um, learn how to cook?” Zinnia asked.

“I know how to cook.”

“Reading?” Olivier shook her head, amused. “More fencing? Horse-riding? Light bulb collecting?” Olivier made a face at that. Coldest than cold, the flower girl was. A little further and her pretty petals would get covered in frost.

“Light bulb collecting? Seriously?”

“What? It’s not that?” Zinnia feigned being offended by not having found out yet.

“I thought you’d said you would know after two minutes.” Olivier took a sip of her drink and made eye contact. “They are up, I’m afraid. Now, what?”

“Now you tell me.” Zinnia shrugged. “It’s simple.”
And it was. Olivier should have given her those two hours. Eventually, she was certain Zinnia would have read it off her slightly kinder eyes. It didn’t take long to realize that the ice was weeping, and when that happened, you had two choices: you either helped melt it away faster or you returned it to its solid state.

What did she want to happen, though? She’d asked herself that question more often than not, lately. The person that she was relied on her presenting herself as the unconquerable queen of ice, of the north. If she gave that up, she would be morphing into someone else entirely. And she didn’t entirely dislike the new warmth that now sat comfortably in her heart.

Slowly, her hand slithered on the table, her fingers coiling gently around Zinnia’s wrist in a soft gesture, and her eyes met the flower girl’s in a way that normally she didn’t allow to happen outside of heir room. It spoke volumes about everything they hoped they were managing to keep hidden for now.

And there were people around, busy with their meals and their sleepy eyes and their silly stories. They just didn’t seem to be paying attention. And soon, even if they didn’t, this little contact that hid so much more would cease to be invisible to them.

Olivier smiled. *The sooner they know, the sooner we can stop being proper.*

“I’ll simply tell you, then.”

It wasn’t a hobby per se, it perhaps was just entertainment. A way to pass the time, a way to make time gentler on all of them. Her duty turned kinder, under the right light. But ever since she’d come up with it, it had made sense to her. Nobody else would do this job, precisely because the man who would most benefit from it refused to accept that next year he would be living a very different life.

It fell to her, then. And she didn’t think it a bad idea. After all, she had given the order.

That morning she sat in her office with a goal. She would find the perfect home for Buccaneer. Somewhere secluded, but not too much, so he could exert his social muscles at ease. Somewhere small that heated quickly, since he despised the cold, as many men here did. Somewhere close to the wall he so loved.

It shouldn’t be this hard, but Olivier was having trouble with it. She’d sent Miles to fetch some more atlases from the library the second he’d walked in, hoping she might find something else to work with than North City. Buccaneer would never accept any type of housing that far away from Briggs. She knew he would like to live nearby, so he could visit sometimes, instruct the newbies on the life they were to live there.

Olivier smiled faintly. Buccaneer’s initiation speeches were always inspirational. They had been, at least, to her.

Now, using Miles to keep Buccaneer in check had evolved into using Miles to keep Miles’s head somewhere else that wasn’t Buccaneer’s meddling ways. Probably not very clever, but it was kinder than locking them up. She couldn’t lock them up, not now. Not after it had… worked.

He arrived to her office not much longer after.

“I brought everything you needed,” he said, gently leaving the books on her desk.
“Thank you.”

“Looking to move out?” he asked, sitting down. It was certainly strange that she was looking into this now. As far as he knew, she would live and die at her post, never straying from the path she had once chosen above all things.

“It’s not for me,” Olivier said at once, opening one of the tomes Miles had brought and skimming it for whatever she was looking for, “it’s for the captain.”

“Ah,” Miles only sad, dumb-founded.

“Since he won’t conduct any of this paperwork on his own, I might as well do it instead. It might make it easier on him when it’s time to leave.”

“I doubt he’ll be happy with anything less than a cottage two feet away from the fort.” Miles said, remembering what Buccaneer had told him once about moving somewhere not too far from all he knew.

“I will find him somewhere proper to live,” Olivier reassured him. “Close enough to here, if that’s what he wants.”

“I’m sure he would appreciate that,” Miles said, conciliatory.

Olivier made a hmph noise.

Nothing in the world would currently make her happier than pleasing Buccaneer, if only that meant he would occupy himself with far more decent activities than keeping tabs on her sentimental life. The recently birthed sentimental life.

She really did feel like she was twenty, lost in a world of men made by men for men, with Buccaneer as the perfect model of a Briggs’ soldier. He still was the model, but that was because he had changed. She remembered a far more annoying man who thought himself on top of the pyramid. This was... definitely a sign that Buccaneer had somewhat mellowed with age, and a reminder that it was her responsibility to bring him safely to the day of his retirement, hard as that would be on every soul on Briggs.

Perhaps he is our spirit far more than I will ever be, she thought. After all, Olivier had only been here for fifteen years, Buccaneer’s whole life had taken place up north, fighting for the wall even if the wall had never had to stand for any cause before.

She couldn’t take the wall away from him, even if she could take him away from the wall. There had to be something around here that she could use, but there were few towns close to the border, and Iver was not an option. He would create a newsstand there, sell gossip like he gave out smiles, and he’d be even more present than he was now.

Perhaps they should consider it, at least. The town was well-situated, at the far end of the valley where vastness spread towards the mountains and the wall that joined them, and not too far away from North City’s resources. It was quaint, tranquil, and their people were fairly nice to the newcomer, if Zinnia’s testimony had counted for anything. Olivier remembered her as standing out from the crowd, because of how obviously foreign she was, not because they didn’t accept her.

I wonder what she has to say about this, if she knows of some place Buccaneer can go... She wouldn’t be wasting any of her time if she casually mentioned her search at lunch or something. And she wouldn’t be wasting it either if she asked directly. But even Olivier herself knew that asking was too definite, she needed her wiggling room first.
But, indeed, she brought it up at lunch, when she was certain that the captain was far enough away that he wouldn’t be eavesdropping. The heated conversation between the other six men at the table made talking privately both harder and easier; harder, because she had to raise her voice and therefore someone might hear, and easier because they were all preoccupied as it was arguing about whether it had been proven that snowflakes had unique shapes.

Zinnia, of course, reacted the only way she could to the news that Olivier was researching the area to find Buccaneer a postretirement home: curiously.

“How did it go? Found anything interesting?”

“Not really. Nothing decent enough. It’s all old houses around here. Most of them are taken, most have no owner but still cannot be reappropriated without a warrant.”

“Mine is a rental,” Zinnia said, suspiciously making distracted eye contact with her.

Olivier blinked, confused for a moment.

“But you’ll be living in it, won’t you?” she said, realizing afterwards that something wasn’t quite right or else Zinnia wouldn’t have offered. “Or are you really up to sharing living quarters with Buccaneer?”

For a moment, Zinnia wasn’t too sure what to say to that. Obviously, what she had in mind had nothing to do with sharing a house with Buccaneer, of all people. But she… hadn’t thought about this in depth as to word it appropriately now. She didn’t even know what she wanted yet.

“Well, I… I’m not sure I’m going to go back there,” Zinnia finally said, so gently that Olivier almost had to ask her to repeat it again.

“You want to stay here?”

Olivier had never really had a feeling that Zinnia especially liked it around the fort, more like she had grown used to it and complacent with what it had to offer, but nothing else. At least the way Olivier saw it, Zinnia remained a civilian in blue garments, camouflaged but still distinctly foreign. Foreign wherever she goes, this flower of mine… A summer bloom surviving the winter, and managing to do a little more than just surviving it.

“Why not?” she just shrugged, suddenly wrapping her fingers around her glass of water, as if it held all the answers within.

“I don’t know,” Olivier replied, taken aback. “I guess I just… thought you wouldn’t.”

“That was before. Things have changed a little,” Zinnia said coyly.

“Maybe it will do you good to remain on the village,” Olivier said, suddenly panicking that things were this long-term and that she wouldn’t know how to plan for it, “have a decent job. You’ll be able to send money to your parents again.”

Zinnia couldn’t help but just stop at that, all her train of thought refusing to be fueled by coal anymore. If they had written to her about this, she had no way of getting those letters. And she wasn’t sure they wouldn’t all have been from her mother, almost screaming at her on paper to get back home and do her duty. Zinnia’s duty, as of now, was working in the perfectly geared fort of Briggs. And she wasn’t giving it up for a daycare job and a part-time dicing meat.

“You can look into my house,” she rephrased it, slower. “For Buccaneer. I can find something else.
And don’t worry about my parents, they’re adults. They can manage without my savings for a while.” But deep down she worried, at least the little bit that she allowed herself to. A little bit of a peek into the small pool of ink of worry that was settling somewhere in her.

“You sure?” Olivier asked, her frown insistent.

“Yeah.”

“I know you’re serious about the house. I mean about your family. I can make an arrangement if you need me to, adjust the budget—”

It was uttered so seriously, the same way that she spoke of official military matters, and Zinnia had no doubt Olivier meant it with all her serious heart. But she still unwrapped her hand from around the glass to put it on Olivier’s to stop her from saying more.

“You’re not cutting money from your budgets so you can further my mum’s crazy daughter issues,” Zinnia said softly.

Olivier smirked now, a little relieved that things were more or less normal and that Zinnia had at least some of them clear. “Daughter issues?”

“I don’t know what else to call it. And shut up.” Zinnia looked away. “I know your mum has them too.”

Olivier scoffed, throwing her hair away. Her scar was visible for a moment, long enough that she hurried to cover it with her hair again. “My mum probably beats yours at it.”

“Exactly. Shut up.”

They ate in silence for a while, both trying to pay attention to other people’s conversations in order to forget about their own, but then Olivier just couldn’t take it any longer. If Zinnia needed anything, her own need to act grew and grew until it surpassed Zinnia’s own.

“I’m serious, though,” she said.

“Oh, I know. You’re always serious.” Zinnia finally looked her in the eye again and smiled a little. Just a little, but it still made Olivier’s heart do somersaults in her chest. “I kinda like it.”

And Olivier blushed. ‘Kinda’ hid more than just a gradient of ‘yes’.

“But what kind of a person would I be, if I let you steal money for my family?” Zinnia added, glancing down at her plate. Then, she added, softly: “And what kind of a person would you become, if you stole money for me?’”

The kind of person who cares too much, Olivier thought with a dark smile. But truth be told, that was the kind of person who she had always been; she’d just never been allowed to show it.

Days later, the idea had more or less taken a shape. Not quite definite, and certainly malleable enough that new ideas could affect it, but at least Olivier had something to work with now. Something solid. She just needed to tell Buccaneer, who up until then knew nothing about his boss’s sneaking out behind his back to prepare for his retirement.

“I think I’ll simply take him out one day, show him the town now that it’s empty, and let him decide
what options he likes.”

“Wait, you’re going to take him to Iver?”

“I want to tie everything up before he’s legally bound to move out, so that’s the best solution I could come up with.”

“I’m not criticizing it. I’m just… surprised —very—that you’d be breaking it out to him so soon. Weren’t you dealing with everything?”

“Well, I can’t exactly send him off to live somewhere he hasn’t approved of. He might as well just continue residing here.”

“Can I go?” Zinnia asked sheepishly.

“What?”

“I mean, if it’s okay. I know I probably shouldn’t, but… it’s been a while.”

Olivier blinked.

“You don’t need to ask me for permission. If you want to ride there one given day, you’re free to do it.”

“Your men can’t. Then I can’t either.”

“You’re not my men.”

“That doesn’t matter now. Can I come with you? Are you taking Miles too?”

Olivier sighed. “Miles is both our moral compass, of course I’ll ask him to accompany us. And you can as well, if you wish to.”

“Why are you talking like you’re in a period drama?”

Olivier sneered. “I do it when I’m nervous.”

“And you’re nervous about this… because?”

“He’s the first soldier ever to retire under my command. I want to make him proud.”

Zinnia hugged her because Olivier could be so cute sometimes.

“You know you already have.”

Olivier felt hugged.

“You’re coming, then?”

“Yes, I think I’d like that.”

“Me too,” Olivier said.

So the next morning Olivier grabbed Buccaneer by his coat and dragged him to the side to tell him to get ready for a ride after breakfast. He looked surprised, as was expectable, but Miles’s face was extraordinarily more expressive when he was informed he was to go with them.
Thus, the four of them silently rode south after eating. The tension was palpable, but no one did anything to cut it. It was a peaceful sort of tension, which didn’t bother them much and was just sort of there, existing between them like air.

The minutes passed slowly as it began to snow around them. The snowflakes seemed to not be falling, but dancing downwards in tiny spirals. It was a soft snow, it wouldn’t form a cascade of white around them for the moment; they would be able to ride in this weather.

There came a time that Olivier just decided to ride on, looking forward, and pretending this wasn’t one of those uncomfortable situations in life that made your throat dry and your heart pound. She reminded herself she had nothing to fear, that she was here on a mission to make all of their lives easier.

And by the time she’d already psyched herself up into riding chin-up, they were already there, in a town that had been temporarily deserted. It was a block of boxes at first, covered in snow from ancient storms, and a layer of cobblestone beneath it all.

The horses’ hooves clacked against it when they began to walk on stone floors rather than snow, and its echoes made the town feel more ghost than it already was. And the ghosts weren’t just the people who used to inhabit it but the memories themselves.

Memories that Olivier’s mind was replaying in silence, exaggerating the colors of them in contrast to the monochrome feel of the winter. Zinnia’s yellow dress, her green ice cream, the color of her skin, the blue of the sky…

She looked at Zinnia out of the corner of her eye and found that the girl was lost in thought as well, probably remembering everything as well. Everything that had united them.

But Zinnia wasn’t just thinking about that. She had suddenly been hit with a wave of powerful nostalgia about the life that had been left behind at Central, a simple frugal life that she’d never wanted and that somehow now she missed, because a part of the person she’d been when had lived in this town had still been the Zinnia who liked Central.

Entering the town from behind rather than from the usual route, Zinnia couldn’t help but drink everything in. The houses of her neighbors, now in such a ruinous state that made her doubt this would be easily fixed in the winter. And she’d broken the glass of a few shops, when she’d still been hiding from the cold—it felt like a lifetime ago.

And then… there it was.

Without noticing it, she tugged at the reins of her horse to make it stop walking. Her house, they were walking past her house. All yellow in the spring, now barely any other shade that wasn’t faint white.

Olivier seemed to notice she was lagging behind. She turned the horse around as Miles and Buccaneer went on. There was a look in Zinnia’s eyes that she didn’t need to decipher.

“Why don’t you go see if there’s… something to salvage?” Olivier said. “Meet us at the square later.”

Zinnia nodded. “Alright.”

She dismounted as Olivier rode away, then tied her horse to a streetlamp, eyes on the house. It had been a while since the last time she had seen it. Although this place had never truly belonged to her, something in her heart felt it as hers anyway. She had lived inside it, she had made it hers.
Treading carefully, she reached the stone stairs of it and couldn’t help but notice that there were no letters under her door, which she’d left open the last time, when Olivier had come rescue her.

Perhaps, if any messenger had really come to Iver since they’d all left, all the letters had been gone with the wind. No wonder, this is a winter ghost town…

Slowly, she opened the door and walked in. The blizzards from these past few months had managed to make their way into the living room, now covered partly in snow. It felt strange, to see the warm colors of the place being washed down by all that white; to see the phone hanging from the drawers it rested on; to see the couch frozen and the walls covered in ice. She saw all the things that had never been hers per se but that had made up her life and she knew winter had truly arrived, before its time.

She thought again about what she’d do, when the winter was over. She used to have a plan, she used to think she’d come back here and just keep dreaming of the things that now she had. So now that she had them, what was she supposed to do? She was still a civilian in a world of armed soldiers, and no matter how welcome she’d eventually grown to feel, she knew this wasn’t a place she could stay at infinitely.

But she couldn’t ask Olivier to resign the post that had made her who she was for… this. It wouldn’t be fair. Just as it wouldn’t be to impose her presence any longer than just the winter. She supposed she could always return to Iver, continue living the dream but only for a few hours a week, when Olivier could afford taking a trip to the town. Otherwise… all Zinnia would have was the longing in her heart for the woman’s company, and the promise that they’d see each other soon, again, as often as could be.

Can you live with either option? she asked herself, but there was no answer yet. These things took time, as all major life decisions did. And Zinnia thought she was taking it better than Olivier.

If she asked Olivier, she would short-circuit, and she’d ask for time to think it through. Yet there was little to think through. Olivier belonged where she was, sitting on a throne she’d accepted and built with her own two hands, and keeping the world safe. Zinnia couldn’t drag her away from all of that, and if she wanted to be with her, then she’d have to accept the throne as well and watch her girlfriend sit on it, trying to never stand in her way.

But, deep down, she still felt she was in the way—perhaps not of everything, like once or twice before, but in the most obvious of ways. She wasn’t one of them, even if she acted like them, did what they did, and even if she’d learned to mingle. And nothing could change that.

Eventually, Zinnia left the house, making sure to close the door behind her this time, carrying a book she’d found lying around under some summer clothes. She’d been tempted to grab them too, if only to please Olivier—or tease her, any would do—, but she just hadn’t.

She met her and Miles and Buccaneer at the square, as agreed. The three of them seemed to be arguing about the houses and even from a distance Zinnia could hear Buccaneer bellowing that if he came to live here, to such a tiny town, he’d die of boredom in three days tops.

That made her smile.

“Let me assure you that you wouldn’t. There’s more to pay attention to in this ‘tiny town’ than you’d think,” Zinnia said to announce herself, and she winked at the captain.

“That’s because you’re the heart of the gossip, not the receptor,” Buccaneer told her.”
“And thank the heavens for that. What would I gossip about?”

“That’s… exactly my point.”

“Come on, you’re you,” Miles said. “You’d find something interesting enough anywhere.”

“Thank you for the compliment, but… seriously. I doubt there’s more than a hundred people living here. It is tiny.”

Olivier scoffed.

“And what do you think other towns are like? Walls like ours or places like North City?”

Buccaneer shut up.

“Take your time to think about it,” Olivier told him as she mounted her own horse, seeing that Zinnia was already atop hers. “But you’ve seen what this town has to offer. It might be really good for you, Julian.”

Zinnia giggled at the name. She’d heard it before and she still found it funny that a man like Buccaneer, so original in every single thing he did, would have such a normal name.

For a little while, he and the general argued about whether or not Buccaneer could just stay at the fort, the same way Zinnia was now. Needless to say, that hadn’t been a conversation Buccaneer should have entered with complete confidence on coming on top of.

Miles smiled at Zinnia from time to time, listening to the two of them bickering just like she was, but he didn’t talk and she was thankful. She had this… coldness in her chest right now, not because of the actual temperature but from having seen the town. Maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea to have come back.

Once Olivier had shut Buccaneer up for the tenth time, she noticed Zinnia’s face and didn’t take long to figure out something had stirred within her.

She drove her horse to trot closer to her, and Miles caught the hint, falling back side-by-side with Buccaneer.

“What’s with the face?”

“What face?” Zinnia said at once, feigning to be fine. “This is my normal, everyday ‘I’m cold’ face.”

Olivier raised her eyebrow at her, accusingly.

“It’s your ‘something’s wrong’ face. I’ve memorized most of them. I’m unbeatable at remembering them.”

“The unbeatable wall.” Zinnia smirked feebly. “She remembers faces now.”

Olivier made a face, suggesting that of course she did remember them.

Zinnia gave in after a few seconds of Olivier’s gaze penetrating her eyes.

“It’s nothing, I just… I’ve been trapped in that metal wall for a while, I didn’t think I’d remember so strongly what would have been in my life if you hadn’t… you know…”

“Trapped you in that metal wall.”
“Saved my ass from freezing,” Zinnia corrected her. “That’s what you did. Don’t think I don’t know I can still catch a train and leave for warmer lands.”

“Maybe you could. I seem to recall you enjoy warmer temperatures. And I won’t pretend to not be overly fond of you in summer attire.

Zinnia blushed at the implication of Olivier thinking she could give this place up and follow Zinnia wherever she went and of Olivier certainly enjoying her showing more bare skin.

“You’re incorrigible,” she whispered half-angrily. Buccaneer and Miles were suspiciously quiet behind them. Then she cleared her throat and said: “Stop staring at me like I’ve just taken a bullet. I’ll be fine. I happen to like the metal wall.”

Olivier smiled to herself. “Of course you do.”

But she knew how long it had taken Zinnia to even feel a little bit welcome in that world of men and war. She knew that if Zinnia liked it now it was because she could share it, not because it was likable in itself. And there was something wicked about that.

She needed to distract Zinnia from thinking about the future like this, or they would both end up arguing or crying about it like teenagers. She needed to do something that would range from adorable to hateful that would manage to get Zinnia’s mind off of things.

Just how the hell was she supposed to do such a thing?

The gate klonked behind them as Buccaneer secured it. Miles and his horse walked on towards the stables, but Olivier purposely made sure Zinnia stayed behind. She wanted to talk to her for a moment, before she went upstairs to work on this magnificent new distraction she was going to cook up for Zinnia.

“What?” Zinnia said, frowning, thinking probably that something was going on. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, don’t worry,” Olivier replied, going for gentle this time. She felt surprisingly alert and jumpy—a bad combination. “I have something important to deal with. Will I see you at dinner?”

Zinnia stared at her, not very sure of what was going on.

“Like you have to ask.” It was their thing, they saw each other at meals, during training, and after dinner. The rest of the time meeting or not depended on chance, or whether Zinnia knew where Olivier was to go see her. Usually, she didn’t. Usually, she contented herself with meals and a bed. It was better than she could have dreamed time ago, anyway.

“I’m asking,” Olivier said, frowning now too. “Is that a problem?”

“No,” Zinnia replied at once. “Of course not.” Then, she just shook her head. This didn’t have to turn into an argument; there was nothing to argue about. “Come on, get up there, work. I’ll see you later, okay?”

And she leaned in to kiss Olivier’s lips in a hurry.

“Yeah, later…” But all Olivier saw was that nostalgia in her eyes that threatened to build walls around Zinnia and she felt awful about it. What can I do to drive that feeling away?
She dismounted in a leap, boots hitting the ground hard, and pushed the reins of her horse into Buccaneer’s chest.

“Here,” she said when Buccaneer’s face contorted into a shocked expression. “Unsaddle her for me, will you?”

And he muttered a quiet: “Yes, sir.”

Zinnia and Miles shared a look as she stomped away.

“What’s up with her?” Miles asked.

Zinnia shrugged

“She says she’s got something important to do.”

“That’s odd,” Miles said. “I thought it’d all been wrapped up today before we left…”

And Zinnia found it odd as well, but she trusted Olivier. Whatever that important thing was, it wasn’t any of her business, and she should have nothing to worry about.

And she hadn’t, not technically.

Olivier got on the first elevator that was free, and she didn’t look twice at who she’d left behind to make happy in her absence. She almost ran once she was out of it into the library, locking herself inside and taking her full first breath.

She had seen something in Zinnia’s eyes she hadn’t liked. The shadow of grief, the shadow of the present she’d given up now. Something like the life she’d had on Iver would have waited for her in North City, with her neighbors and friends. Although, truth be told, Olivier had never seen Zinnia have friends, not like the ones she’d made in the fort. Perhaps, she thought as well, in the fort she’d had no choice but to eventually make them.

Olivier walked around for a while until she found the book she’d been looking for. It was an old volume, its cover green and worn, and it delved on matters she hadn’t thought about in years. Not that she ever had thought about it herself, but the people around her.

She sat down at one of the dust-covered tables and opened it, passing her fingertips over the title.

*Botany,* Olivier thought. *Here we are again. Did you miss me?*

She didn’t have the heart to admit that maybe she had.

“So you’re a…?” she had asked, hands behind her back, as she took the room in. It was the first time she saw it, and she’d never shared a living space with so much green. The plants took over the empty corners and the colors of the flowers in some of them made it all look like an enchanted forest.

“Botanist?” Ianthe had turned around with a polite smile. She’d been watering a tiny plant she had on her desk, hands careful not to spill a drop of it. “Yeah. I mean, I’m studying to be.”

Olivier had made an approving noise. She would have considered college herself if her mother hadn’t thought it a way for her to get a husband.

“And an educated young woman, are we?”

“I’m not doing it for the prestige.” Ianthe had said, almost harshly. She hadn’t liked to be compared
with those women that, like Olivier’s mother, believed in the power of college only because it would find them a proper spouse. Ianthe hadn’t wanted marriage opportunities, she’d always just wanted to learn, to see past societal constraints and see what nobody else even wanted to. “I just really, really love plants.”

“How so?” Olivier had said, looking around. She hadn’t been too sure then just how far this thing would go, and standing there it should have been clearer to her, surrounded by Ianthe’s essence. All those green books and little plants and flowers in the shelves, the desk, the walls. Olivier hadn’t thought it safe—those plants could almost come alive at night to strangle either of them—, but if Ianthe did, she would trust her judgment.

Olivier had known Ianthe wasn’t afraid of answering her question. Ianthe wasn’t afraid of anything in the world, Olivier had been positive about that. Not of much else, but of that at least. It had been one of her fundamental truths, and one that she hadn’t learned in the academy.

“They’re that part of life that we pretend to understand,” Ianthe had said, in answer to her question. “We’ve studied them for years, we think we have them down to the letter… But from time to time a new species sprouts that sends scientists ’round the bend. It’s just… the mystery of life, far more than humans are. At least to me.”

What a different life that had been, spending time with the cute little botanist who breathed fire when angry. Ianthe and Zinnia were so different, Olivier couldn’t even put her finger on just how different they were, and not just concerning plants. Ianthe had devoted her life to studying them, trying to figure out the big secret to them, and she always stopped to smell the flowers, because she’d used to say they were the windows to everyone’s soul. They were like a mirror, they gave you back that which you could not normally see. Zinnia, on the other hand, couldn’t stand them. And if Ianthe had been right, maybe it was precisely because Zinnia wasn’t overly fond of mirrors either.

No one likes their true reflection.

Olivier allowed herself a tiny smile as she flipped through the pages. She didn’t know why she was sitting there, reading about flowers, but she didn’t want to be anywhere else, not even inside her own memories. Doing this, Zinnia would cheer up. In a way. Olivier getting her flowers would at least separate her feelings and let her focus on anger and questions like ‘why are you like this’. Olivier had to do this, if only just for that tiny moment in which the shadows in Zinnia’s eyes were eclipsed by some warmth.

She was planning on finding some Central flowers, local and typical, but her memory was already screwed over all those years she’d spent in the north. And that was why she was consulting encyclopedias with more dust than the entire room. To find some to bring to Briggs in a bouquet that would probably get thrown to her face.

She couldn’t remember for the life of her if Central was home to Lady’s Mantle or the Flamingo Flower or Hyacinths. And the more she consulted those expert pages the less sure she was if there would even be flowers in flower shops this time of year. She had no idea how the business was these days, even if she had an aunt in it. She hadn’t stayed in contact with her for too long to actually remember anything about what she did. Olivier’s only memories concerning her were that she had been the only Armstrong woman before her to refuse her established path and find her own, building it if she had to. She had been a kind but strict woman who hadn’t been around much, but Olivier remembered her not turning down a request or a question, like her own mother had used to. For a while, Mr Armstrong even took to saying that his sister was a spy, conning everyone under the pretense of a woman with a flower shop. Now, Olivier thought it funny. She could use an aunt that knew about flowers.
Out of nowhere, suddenly her eyes zoomed in on a name. The zinnia flower.

Before she dry-laughed, Olivier opened her eyes wide. If Zinnia hadn’t been flower girl up to now, if by any chance in the world that hadn’t been Olivier’s way to think about her, today the nickname would have been born anyway.

It was meant to be, fated. This was the flower Olivier needed to find. What Zinnia would see in it was not something Olivier herself could guess, but anything was better than letting her dwell over a past she’d left behind. She had to stop it, with laughter or wrath, anything would do.

If she could stop it with love, she would try.

And try, she was going to.

“Austin!” Olivier called.

The gathering of soldiers right outside the kitchen suddenly stood up straighter and gulped in silence.

Austin stepped forward.

“Yes?”

Olivier handed him a slapdash paper folding where she’d written everything he would need to know for the mission she was sending him on. She’d thought him ready for a long time now, he’d surpassed her expectations of a boy fresh out of Central. He was a Central lapdog no more now, he belonged to Briggs, to the north. And to her command.

“Your orders,” she explained as the boy took the paper in his hands and opened it.

_Zinnia elegans_, she’d written on it, plus a few more details about it being a flower of predominantly pink and fuchsia hues. There were several other species within the genus of the flower, but this had been Olivier’s favorite—because of the colors, in a way unique to this flower, and the way the name had reminded her of Zinnia’s elegance, which wasn’t obvious to the common observer but clear to whoever had watched her stand for what she believed in and loved.

Olivier hadn’t seen anyone deal with someone else’s problems as elegantly as Zinnia did.

“I’m… sorry. Have I understood correctly? You want me … to find a flower?” A flower that’s named like… you-know-who, she knew he would have wanted to add.

“Quite correctly, soldier. The weather is most agreeable this morning, you may ride to North City if you wish. Find a partner to ride with you who will then return the horses there. I expect you to board an early train to Central as soon as possible and return within the week.”

Austin blinked several times. She was giving him a week to find a flower in the city he knew best, but still… this was odd. More than odd, unusual. And he had a feeling this had little to do with his actual job. But if this involved the relationship Captain Buccaneer had tried so hard to spark, then Austin would do his utmost to help out. Perhaps Olivier was planning to ask Zinnia out by bringing her a flower she shared a name with.

“But… how should I look for it? I’ve lived in Central my whole life, and yet I wouldn’t know how to find something this specific.”
Olivier gave him a pointed look he soon took to mean that this was not her problem but his duty to overcome.

“Report to Northern Command. They’ll procure means to get you to Central.”

“Yes, sir,” Austin said. “Thank you, sir.”

“Good luck,” Olivier said before her long mane of blonde hair got lost in the crowd pooling around the kitchen.

Austin couldn’t help but stare at the piece of paper she’d given him.

A flower. He was being sent south, back home, for a flower.

Odd and unusual, and… in a way different from what Olivier ordered people to do. She hardly ever sent newbies on missions, maybe he’d finally proven useful to her.

One of his mates patted him in the back.

“Man, you get to try the wonderful Central Command accommodations. Way warmer than Briggs’ bunks. I wish I was you.”

But Austin was pretty sure that the first thing he’d do back in his city wouldn’t be to find a room in Central Command but get back to his own room at his parents’ place. He was going home.

Chapter End Notes

I started Chapter 60 just yesterday and I can’t believe how far the story has come since this chapter. There’s so many things to enjoy now, and so many more to come. And this chapter has so much soft banter, I’d totally forgotten ^^
Cogitavit bellum

Chapter Notes

A bit of action again!

He twiddled his hands, sitting in an office he’d only ever stood in before. This was new to him, and not in an exciting way, but rather in a potentially dangerous one. Olivier wasn’t keen on calling people to her office to just talk, she either brought people up there to give them bad news or she never did. Austin was not brave enough to have high hopes, not in the slightest.

He had just returned from Central, quite early in the morning, eyelids heavy and his brain slightly foggy. He’d had to get up before the sun to fetch a fresh flower for the woman who now sat across him. He kept glancing at the few specimens he’d bought, then down at his hands, hoping that Olivier had found the state of the flowers well-preserved enough.

Sitting there, he began to wonder if maybe this wasn’t bigger than just a flower, if she was about to interrogate him about something else. She had sent him into enemy land, after all. Central was to Briggs what Briggs was to Central, a hostile land of savages that, despite being military as well, could not be trusted, not entirely.

But, as it turned out when she opened her mouth to speak, he hadn’t been appointed as a temporary mole, after all:

“This is it…” she said, judgmental.

She had never seen the flowers before, she had had no idea what they looked like in the flesh, pictures did them so little justice. But, truth be told, perhaps Olivier had been expecting something more impressive.

“It’s… I mean, I acquired it right before getting on the train. It’s… almost fresh,” Austin said, trying to sound convincing, and above all, confident. She liked her soldiers to mirror her innate confidence, but Austin was of the opinion that she often forgot they weren’t all like her. She made them who they were, because of who she was; they didn’t come to the north as part of the inner workings of Briggs. “But by the looks of it, it probably won’t last long. Might want to… um… put them on a vase.”

“It’ll take that into account,” Olivier said impassively. She needn’t have summoned him there for this, she could tell there was something dark and scary going on through the boy’s mind, and her intent today wasn’t to torture him. He’d learned plenty of lessons by her unkind hand. Olivier even managed a quick smile, tense and small. “You may leave.”

“If you require nothing else…” Austin said as he left his chair.

“Actually, yes,” Olivier said. “Fetch Miles. Tell him to cancel my patrol tonight.”

The flowers were here, and she would see to them surviving the day, but tonight was the night. Her own Zinnia flower, lost in memories of past seasons and the uncertainty of new seasons to come, would benefit greatly from this little touch of humor Olivier had dug out of herself.
“You’re still… doing patrol?” Austin asked stupidly.

It took one look from Olivier for the boy to shake his head and realize his mistake. He was asking the least appropriate questions.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I’ll be right out. Thank you for your time.”

He turned around to leave again, fairly less confident than before.

“And… Austin?” Olivier’s voice called him back.

“Yes?” he said, voice shaking a little, turning to meet her icy blue eyes.

“You’ve done well,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You’re… you’re welcome!”

“Now go.”

And she noticed he had this face, like he was holding something back, something important to some extent. But she had no idea what it could be, clearly nothing he thought she should know or he would have reported to her already.

Olivier decided to trust her head, not her gut, and dismiss it.

Austin went straight to the lounge room for a coffee. He took one glance at the schedules for the day and cursed his bad luck. He had night shift tonight, he would need the caffeine.

It had been a long enough trip back to the north, after just a couple of days, that he could have slept in the train, but he’d been wide awake then, just looking at the flowers he was carrying and wondering what the hell was going on that Olivier needed them for. It clearly wasn’t for anything official, it couldn’t be, but… romantic-wise, what could it mean?

He’d soon forgotten about flowers as soon as he’d arrived to Central a few days back, he still felt uneasy from it. His sleeping quarters had been at the heart of the Amestrian military, and what he’d seen had far from reminded him of home.

“Hey,” a fellow soldier greeted him when he walked towards the coffee machine, the door slamming shut behind him. “Back already?”

“Back already,” Austin replied as he yawned, slowly preparing his coffee. With milk and sugar, always.

“Yeah, how was mommy and daddy, eh, Austin?” some more guys pitched in. Austin ignored them as he poured the milk.

“Lots of people this time of year?” Smith asked. “I hear winters are lovely down south. Snows are even a big deal.”

“Yeah,” Austin said, sitting down at a table with the few men who were on their breaks. “There was hardly any. Snow, I mean. There were plenty of people. I suppose that’s just what Central is like.”

But now that he thought about it, he hadn’t seen as many people as there should be in late fall. It
attracted tourist population from all over the country and even a few visitors from foreign countries, and yet this year there had barely been any tourist activity Austin had been aware of.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, lost in thought. “It all felt… weird.”

“It’s Central, it’s meant to be,” Smith replied, laughing. He’d been born up north, he wouldn’t know, Austin thought.

“No, I mean…” Austin said. “There was an odd feeling about everything. Something was not right. The command center was crawling with people, and yet… they didn’t seem to be doing anything other than gather, and not to talk about the war itself but something that these wars are hiding.”

“No way,” someone said. “You uncovered a plot all on your own? Little Austin did us a great service!”

“Shut up,” Austin said, blushing very red. “I didn’t uncover anything. I just think it’s weird, that’s all. I’ve lived there my whole life, spent a few years in Central Command… It’s the first time I see something like that.”

Smith leaned back on his chair, stroking his chin.

“Maybe the kid’s got a point and there’s something fishy going on.”

Olivier getting out of her office at this hour was not news lately. She snuck out, it was common knowledge, whether to do routine checks on everyone on her floor or—as no one knew—to see what Zinnia was doing, even from a distance or just for a second and a quick hi. It made her feel like they were actually an item that way, it reminded her that, against all odds, they were. As if most things now wouldn’t remind her of it as well. But strolling around felt like more efficient work.

She saw her behind a semi-closed door, hunched over Buccaneer’s maps, probably finishing up on the details of the route Olivier had already almost approved. Zinnia’s hair was now long enough that it got in her eyes and she had to constantly brush it away as she worked. Olivier had to look away before her stomach fluttered, growing wings out of nowhere and then slamming her against the ground.

She went down to the lounge for a quick drink to get her brain back on track and maybe finish up early today, so she could go fetch Zinnia for their training and spend a little while longer at it.

She’s turned my brain into mush, Olivier thought reluctantly.

And she said to herself, in response to that: your brain has always been mush, Armstrong. You’ve just been excellent at hiding that.

And she had never had the chance before to allow herself to show just how bad that mush could spread in her. She liked being the small spoon and it frustrated her, because at her height it would be mutually benefiting to be the big spoon.

A coffee, at this point, would get her mind going so fast she’d fly past those kinds of thoughts.

She was about to push her way into the room when she listened to it.

“They are up to something, I can tell. Nobody does what they’re doing and just… hope to get
nothing out of it. We should get on it soon.”

Her entire soul fell all the way to her feet, and she didn’t dare move to pick it up. Were they… talking about her and Zinnia? Could it be that Austin, the little bastard, had gone on and told everyone that there was very juicy flower business going on that may interest them all.

But ‘we should get on it soon’ just sounded ominous to her. She’d thought she’d explicitly forbidden Buccaneer’s clique to get involved again. There was nothing to get involved in now, it all was done, they all had permission to stay behind and watch if they pleased, but nothing else. Never anything else.

Now more people were in on it. And if more people knew, this was already out of her control, if it ever had truly been. She and Zinnia were just another big rumor crawling up the walls of the wall. They were entertainment, like books had once been to her, like writing was to Zinnia. A way to channel everything that went unsaid and undone, and Olivier’s downfall.

She turned around at once, without stopping to listen for what Austin was saying next. If she had, maybe she would have found out sooner that he was only talking about what he’d picked up on at Central. But she hadn’t stayed to hear that; right now she just needed to tell the other woman these rumors would eventually reach them all.

This could not be allowed to get much further if now more people knew. And if she couldn’t stop it, at least she could be the first to climb on a tank and just announce it for the whole fort to hear, that indeed she was in a relationship and that it was none of their business why or how or what it meant for them. She was simply not brave enough for that, not even to just accept it was out. Olivier would fight till the end.

And fighting maybe meant cornering Austin before this got too far out of reach.

She quickly went to grab Zinnia for an early training session. Buccaneer didn’t even blink, surprisingly, when he saw her walk into the room with all the confidence in the world (all feigned at this point and a souvenir of so many years of feigning it), instead of waiting outside.

Zinnia immediately noticed it, as if she’d learned truly how Olivier’s real confident stance looked like. She was slowly learning the fine details of loving her.

“What? What’s wrong?”

Olivier looked around and shook her head.

“Nothing’s wrong, but…” she said. “I’d prefer we took it upstairs.

And upstairs meant the gymnasium.

“Sit down,” she said as soon as the door was closed behind them.

Zinnia frowned. “You’re really going to ask me to sit down? What is it? Are you pregnant? Is it mine?”

Olivier just glared. She didn’t feel capable of anything else.

She told Zinnia briefly, then. About the little knot in her throat that threatened to shout treason at whoever was spreading truths about them as if they were anybody else. But they weren’t, she had never been, and she didn’t plan on being now. Now less than ever.
Yet Zinnia didn’t experience this the same way, she had nothing to fear, no reputation to uphold because hers was ever-changing, dependent on the day and the weather and how moody she was. Olivier had been moody externally for fifteen years, she had a name to stay true to and people to protect, but she should also be protecting what was hers and hers only, not boasting of it for the world to hear. The world didn’t care and she was not about to try and convince it to.

And when Olivier was done, it was made even clearer that they had opposite ways of processing all of this.

“Listen, I understand it’s different for you… but we’re not hiding. There’s nothing to hide.”

“Do you want to be the ‘mysterious young woman’ who has thawed the wall of ice up north?” Olivier said, biting, not realizing that this was what Zinnia had already become, a mystery who had charmed the uncharmable. “The tabloids are not kind.”

“Nobody knows me. It’s not like I care what they might say, you do.”

Olivier ignored that and continued:

“You’ll be a target for the press—”

“And a spot on your flawless career,” Zinnia insisted. “I know. Trust me, if this was out already, we’d be aware of it. Buccaneer isn’t the only one here with undying enthusiasm.”

“I hope you are right.”

Zinnia observed her quietly. She had begun pacing back and forth, unsure where to step and unsure where to stop, hair moving around her. Zinnia still thought she should have kept on braiding it, if only to keep it out of her way.

She put a hand around Olivier’s wrist to make her stop chewing the inside of her cheeks from fretting.

“If you’re so worried,” Zinnia said, “just talk to him about this. Miles and Buccaneer already know, where’s the harm in letting someone else keep the… secret?”

The way she said ‘secret’ upset Olivier. It wasn’t a secret, it wasn’t dirty or offensive or anything she wanted hidden out of shame. It was simply something that, once out, would never be able to stay between the two of them. And there had already been a few breakouts of excitement between the men, enough to have proven to Olivier that she did well in being scared of people knowing.

This would be a first, and it would not help with Briggs’ reputation. The things the newspapers would say, the things the military would say… If it had been just something Olivier had done, like killing someone or being especially cold, then she would have taken it proudly and worn every rude headline like a crown. But now those headlines would be exposing Zinnia as well, and Olivier would never allow that.

“The harm,” Olivier counterattacked, “is that I don’t trust him with that information and that I have no idea what he could do with it.”

“Austin isn’t that bad,” Zinnia said. “He’s a good kid. And he respects you. If you tell him to quit it, he will.”

“Yeah, and maybe I will have to. They’re so serious about it when they talk, as if this were…”
“What?” Zinnia pressed it. She could tell there was something else underneath all that.

“Nothing. Doesn’t matter.”

“No. Tell me. As if this were what?”

Olivier finally gave up and, sitting down, she said it: “As if this were to have an impact on their lives.”

“In a way, it has,” Zinnia pointed out. “I never belonged here, and you offered me commodities they don’t enjoy.”

“You’re a guest here, don’t forget that. They’re working. You shouldn’t be doing half the things you are, you’re not part of the workforce here. I should be treating you the same way I would treat any other civilian guest.”

Zinnia put a finger under Olivier’s chin to tilt her head up. Not that she needed to because it was pretty far up already.

“It has an impact on their lives, and that’s fine. I know my place and I know this won’t be it until…”

Now it was Zinnia’s turn to trail off.

“Until…?”

“Until it goes public, until they know this isn’t a game and you’re—okay, it sounds terrible anyway, you giving me special treatment because I’m your… date,” she murmured the last word.

“That’s not making me feel any better.”

“It’s not supposed to,” Zinnia said gently, sitting on Olivier’s lap. “This is what things are like. Take it or leave it. I know you’re the kind of woman to make the harshest choices.”

“Not in this.”

“They’re not like that,” Zinnia said. “Talk to Austin and you’ll see. They might not even have been talking about us, hasn’t that occurred to the mind that defeated the Drachman once and is planning to do it again, huh?”

Olivier chuckled dryly. “They were talking about us. There’s nothing else to talk about for miles.”

“You and I heard how a dude asked another dude out in the shower. They could be focusing on that.”

Olivier rolled her eyes. The memory became fresh in her mind, and not precisely the one about the two men gossiping about it. Zinnia had been about to run away, a thought that now turned almost funny in her mind. How could Zinnia, the heart of this place, ever have been thinking about leaving? In Olivier’s mind, it was an incongruence, a paradox that nothing would solve.

Before this one woman had shown up in her life, Briggs hadn’t been the perfect place by far, although it had had its finer points, but then Zinnia had come in, half-frozen to death and lost somewhere Olivier couldn’t reach, and warmth had turned softer, the cold more and more appealing, every lunch another opportunity, and every waking moment a chance to risk what Olivier hadn’t risked in too long and had, inevitably, ended up risking.

“You do belong here,” Olivier grumbled all of a sudden, having lost already. She would just have to
talk to Austin, instill some sense into his young head before Buccaneer got through to him, which she was sure he might already have done. “To me, you do.”

Zinnia just looked at her, not daring to contradict her just yet as directly as she would have liked to.

“But I’m not like you,” she said instead. “And that shows, and denying it won’t help anyone deal with this any better.”

“We’re not discussing you fitting in or not here. This is a matter of going public.”

“It’s because I don’t fit in that this is a big deal, don’t you see?” Zinnia said softly, as if teaching something to a kid. “If I was one of you, you wouldn’t be needing to make a public announcement in order to feel like you’re avoiding something worse.”

Olivier shut up, the only thing that she could do, because the flower girl was right.

“If I was one of you,” Zinnia continued, “none of this would be a big deal. And you wouldn’t care less about what the tabloids said regarding ‘that mysterious young man with strong back muscles and a killer smile that has thawed the ice wall’, because that young man would already be living in your world, impervious to the tabloids and their bad press.”

Olivier did now look at her matter-of-factly.

“You do know I’m a lesbian, don’t you?”

Zinnia rolled her eyes.

“It’s just an example!”

“Well, it’s a terrible one.”

Zinnia sighed.

“Look, I’m okay with people knowing, and part of me already needs them to know because I hate hiding like I’m doing something wrong. I had enough of that before,” she muttered that last sentence. “If you want to keep it this way a bit longer, fine. Just, please, stop being so paranoid and get your hands on some facts before you accuse anybody of robbing you—” Olivier glared softly. “—okay, fine: us. Of robbing us of our privacy, okay?”

“M’kay…”

That single request to be pragmatic was the reason why Olivier tried not to listen to the murmurs of the people around her all day and night and instead took a few hours to make the decision to call Austin to her office and just calmly—as if Zinnia, the voice of reason, was sitting next to her judging—discuss this matter with him.

It wouldn’t stop what had already happened, but it would prevent Austin from telling the entire fort about what he’d been sent to Central to do. And Olivier desperately needed that to stay a private affair for a little while longer, until she figured out how to be a normal woman with a normal life, even if that life took place in a warzone.

She chose a sunny morning so that the fear wouldn’t seep into him from the first second she caught sight of him and told him to follow her all the way to the office. She knew he still had trouble being confident and tried not to be too serious about it, walking side-by-side with him instead of dashing across the corridors without waiting for him to catch up. She even held the door open for him once
they were on the right floor and didn’t allow herself to watch him, trying to instill some sense of insecurity in him, because that sense was already there and all she had to do was act normal.

And her normal, per se, was already pretty intimidating.

She sat down slowly.

“Austin. Take a seat,” she said. Olivier didn’t dare use her angry voice on him now. This was too personal and she was already on thin ice if he knew more than he was letting on.

But her icy tone caught him up to what was going on, if he hadn’t known for sure before. It was clear she wanted something, and that it would entail no praise, but quite the contrary.

Austin took a deep breath to calm himself down, counting backwards from thirty to lose himself in the numbers and not her serious expression.

“I didn’t summon you here for chitchat,” she said once she noticed he was slightly less shaky, “as you may have already guessed.”

He cleared his throat. “Yes.”

“I’ve… noticed—” She picked that word carefully, avoiding much narrower options that would made him wish he had never come to Briggs “—that things seem a little heated since you’ve been back. Anything to comment on the matter?”

“I, uh… I wasn’t sure if I should say something.”

“I’m asking you to now.” Politely, she thought to herself. She just tightened her fists together and kept going. “Because I am the one who calls the shots around here, and that kind of power is not to be… forgotten about, am I clear?”

If she hadn’t been, her eyebrows, still arched on her face, certainly were.

“Well, I… There’s not a nice way to say it,” Austin stuttered.

Olivier was sitting on the edge of her chair, hoping for sweet confirmation so she could finally act, and then come back to her room at night and present Zinnia with the evidence.

See? They were all up to something. Be a little glad I stopped it in time, she would say as Zinnia rolled her eyes at how silly it was. And she would be right to, but Olivier needed this. Controlling the image other people had of her was an impossibility she felt she still needed to at least try to reach for.

But when Austin opened his dry mouth again to speak, all her presuppositions fell to the floor.

“Things are strange at Central, more than I remembered.”

What? she thought immediately. He hadn’t been spreading gossip?

Damn it, Zinnia was right. And there was nothing more embarrassing than to admit defeat to a partner who was so intent on convincing you they were right in the first place and just trying to guide you towards the right path. But Olivier had heard Austin’s words as well as what they did not mean, and she couldn’t just ignore them.

Central wasn’t precisely the epitome of harmony and divine society, but calling it strange was a stretch, especially if that categorization came from a boy who up until a few months back had been living there.
Olivier leaned towards him a little. So it had nothing to do with the flowers… Then what was all the fuss about? Could it be she’d misinterpreted the men’s serious faces all long?

“In what way are they ‘strange’?” she asked.

“In every way possible. I can’t—I can’t explain it. But it… made me feel uneasy.” Austin shook his head. “It’s just a feeling, it’s nothing important.”

“No,” Olivier said, and he was shocked at the firmness of it, without it being cruelly so. “It might be important. Keep going.”

He licked his lips, looking for a proper way to phrase it without being confusing.

“It felt as if something was brewing,” he said. “All the highest ranks were there. That’s… that’s odd, isn’t it?” His eyes met hers, waiting for her to dismiss it and say that it really wasn’t. Someone had to convene and fix the problems of the society they had created, after all.

“Not necessarily,” Olivier said, easing his mind a little. “Sometimes there are gatherings.” She was hardly invited to any of them, but she knew that whenever something important came up, the high ranks had these meetings to discuss them. If they thought it appropriate, they would send a letter up north for her to read.

“It gave me that impression.” Austin nodded. “That they were gathered, somehow, for something important. And the Führer…” he added, suddenly recalling something else. “He was away. And I also learned a new alchemist has been recruited on his command. Edward Elric, the Fullmetal Alchemist. He’s the youngest yet, a boy of not yet fifteen.” He made sure to quickly add, to play it down a little: “It could have been nothing but… it’s too many things at once, I suppose.”

“What?”

All Olivier knew from how the military recruited new state alchemist came from the days in which her brother had been studying for the exam, and she couldn’t hide her surprise at finding out that a boy had managed to pass it. Alex himself had had to join the force long before he had earned the title of state alchemist.

“Yes,” Austin confirmed. “And… Mustang, from Eastern Command? He’s been summoned there. I saw him with one of his subordinates.”

“How do you know Colonel Mustang?” Olivier asked without preamble.

“Central has always had an eye on him. My superiors spoke of him often,” Austin said as if it were no big deal, realizing in doing so that it might just be.

Olivier sat back on her chair and stroked her chin.

“Did they, now?” she said. “Did you talk to any of your old superiors? Did they say anything that might prove your claims, Austin?”

Austin had to think about it. He already thought that the fact that all of those things were happening and were happening now said something about the state of affairs, but he wasn’t sure how much, and he was glad he’d been summoned to speak of it before it got too big for the men to handle. “They said something about… the wars. We’re at war with Aerugo and Creta as well, sir,” he added, hoping it would be the last piece of the puzzle for her to figure out.

“I’m well aware, yes.”
She wasn’t up to date on how those two wars were faring; she had her own to worry about.

“They spoke of it as a ‘plan,’” Austin continued. “I didn’t understand what they were making reference to.”

Olivier even smiled, sad.

“No, I wouldn’t expect you to.”

His face relaxed. “So all of this makes sense to you?”

“Yes,” she lied, because she felt she had no other choice. If this reached the whole of Briggs, worry would spread like wildfire, and she would have to deal with it the olden way, by force.

What Austin had told her was odd, very odd. Wars were never planned, not this way. Amestris was facing three fronts and could not sustain more than two, something had to be going on, there had to be some plot the government hadn’t shared with her.

“Yes, it is all alright, soldier,” she said. “Rest easy, the world won’t crumble on all of our heads. Besides, you’re in the north now. The rules are different here.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “Thank you for receiving me.”

And he then left, and Olivier just sat there, unable to figure out what the hell was going on, but knowing now that something was going on if all of these factors had coincided. No one would have brought Mustang to Central without having a reason to. No one would have spoken of the current wars as a ‘plan’, or she would have known of said plan.

This couldn’t come at a worse time for her, she had her own battle plans to mind.

Whatever was happening, though, she had to keep her soldiers’ minds away from it—and her own as well. They needed to focus on the north, southern affairs belonged to southern politicians, not to them.

Later that day, she talked to Zinnia about her being right, because Austin hadn’t been giving away details of his trip south, and Olivier had not mentioned any of her suspicions that something was happening, big enough that it was being kept a secret in light of the wrong people finding out. She saw no need to worry her, or anyone else.

That was why, before they went to dinner she gathered them all in one of the amplest rooms of the fort. Men sprouted out of everywhere, both in the lower levels and up on the floors surrounding this one, all looking to her, midway across the stairs.

She had decided that the wisest thing to do was drive their minds away from trouble into the one and only risk they ran here at Briggs: their neighboring country. Anything else shouldn’t be up to them to worry about, and she wasn’t about to let them.

She had come prepared with a new shiny thing to show them.

When she began speaking, the room quietened, and her voice carried:

“Listen up, men,” she said. “It’s come to my knowledge that you seem to be worried about things back at Central. It wouldn’t be the first time our friends in the south give us reason to, and it won’t be the last.” She chuckled softly. “Rest assured of that. But this—this is not the south. Whatever it is that they’re doing, they will handle it. We have much bigger fish to fry, and we will fry them.” She raised
her voice a little more for emphasis. “Starting now, a new Mountain Men route will be established. It will cover more ground and allow for a faster retreat, if necessary. Preparations are being carried this very moment for it, and, consequently, some of your names will be drawn these next few days to join the first batch that gets to inaugurate it, so be ready if you are called.”

When silence came, the mutters started, and she began walking down the stairs, losing herself in the crowd looking for Miles.

She saw confused faces, probably because they had been expecting her to comment more on the problems at Central, but she decided to ignore them. Eventually, they would forget. Gossip didn’t usually last very long around the fort, just until the next big thing happened.

She cursed in her own mind. She was the current big thing, then, if this wasn’t to take shape in their minds. Was she ready to uphold that title for however long it was necessary to keep them off of public matters at Central?

*Perhaps I will just have to make the sacrifice,* Olivier thought, finally having localized the major in the crowd. He was walking towards Buccaneer, who had heard the news in a corner of the room and was laughing with a group of people. She hoped to catch Miles before he got there too, so she walked faster.

Reaching out, she grabbed his coat’s sleeve to call his attention.

“Major,” she said. “A moment, please.”

Since he did the organization of the schedule, she would need him in order to choose who got to join this upcoming first expedition. Miles was the best at this sort of task, knowing his fellow soldiers well enough to know who would be optimal for what Olivier expected of it.

He stopped to face her, his face calm and patient although he was on a break at the moment. She liked that about him, that even if it could refuse to pay attention, he still did, because he liked what his duty was.

“Of course,” he said.

Slowly, she led him to a quiet corner as everyone headed in the opposite direction, to dinner or the great stairs that led to wherever they were supposed to be.

For a brief second, Miles couldn’t help but entertain the idea that perhaps she was about to confide something private and intimate that nobody else was fit for hearing, as it once had almost been.

But the illusion shattered when she crossed her arm, leaning on a wall, and said:

“I’ll need you to choose twenty men for the first expedition of the Flower Route.”

“The… Flower Route,” he repeated, confused.

Olivier merely stared at him, almost defying him to say something about the obvious reference.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m counting on you to select a few men. You know the usual requirements.”

“Will it be simultaneous with the other MM batch?” he asked.

“Not necessarily, but it wouldn’t hurt if it were,” Olivier said. “The more men we have out there, the better.”
And she was right, but they didn’t dispose of that many men to have three batches at the same time. Two would cost them dearly, too.

“We haven’t found anything yet, there’s probably nothing to find.”

“I’m not taking any chances, Miles. I intend to win this war.” She stood upright again. “Find me those men.”

They were orders, after all, and Miles took them like he had for years now. It was easy, really. Olivier gave him a command and he followed it to the end of the line, as it should be. His loyalty was unwavering, and he didn’t need her to acknowledge her to continue betting on it before he bet on anything else. He trusted her judgment and left without another word.

Olivier sighed when she was finally alone, the men having slithered away already. She was doing everything wrong, but she had no idea how to do it right, so this would have to do for now. If she thought about all that escaped her, she would buy a ticket on the earliest train next morning and make sure she saw what Austin had with her own eyes. Never again would she trust another person’s word unless she had seen it for herself.

She skipped dinner that night, her stomach had closed itself up, locked her away, and she didn’t think she would end up eating much anyway, so she went back to her office, deserted now, and removed a bottle of liquor from one of the hidden drawers of her desk.

Olivier needed it today. Not to forget, but to cope.

She had barely finished her first glass when there was a rap on the door.

She sat up straighter, not bothering to hide the bottle again. People already knew she wasn’t exactly contrary to alcohol, especially late at night when the bulk of her work had been done already.

“Come in,” she said.

She had been expecting someone with more questions about the route or Central, but instead the face who popped up behind the door was Zinnia’s, and Olivier’s heart softened. It might have even forgotten about the wars, if Zinnia herself hadn’t brought them inside, shining in her eyes like fire in the night.

“Didn’t see you at dinner,” Zinnia said, closing the door behind her.

“Paperwork,” Olivier said, but she immediately realized that it wasn’t a good excuse; her desk was bare. She wondered how much she would be able to conceal now that it was one-on-one and things were so recent.

Zinnia didn’t comment on the obvious lie. Instead, she walked closer and sat down on Olivier’s lap, putting an arm around her shoulder.

“That was a good speech,” she said, toying a little with one of Olivier’s stray locks of hair and braiding it. She hadn’t learned how to produce a decent braid, but the weaving part of it calmed her down. She could understand why Buccaneer had a butt-long thin braid and the positives effects it had on his moods, if this worked for him the same way that it did for her.

“It was rubbish and you know it.”

“You’re really not worried about it?”
“I’ve no reason to think something’s wrong. And it’s none of my business if it is. We guard the north,” Olivier added, simply. She put both her arms around Zinnia’s body, but it wasn’t rushed or tense, just a way to feel her closer.

Zinnia took a deep breath, trying to be patient. Sometimes talking to Olivier was like talking to the little children that had used to clot Zinnia’s street back at Central.

“So you don’t want to trust Austin, that’s it.”

“He’s a child, he’s not been in this long enough to know. Sometimes we pull strings others think are knives.”

“You could trust me,” Zinnia said. “And I think he sounded pretty concerned, judging by what you told me. And the rest of them, too. Enough to make you think something was going on and that they knew.”

“They don’t. I prefer them not to,” Olivier said, stubbornly.

“It wouldn’t hurt to come clean,” Zinnia said. Then, she frowned. “About everything.”

Ah, so Zinnia was talking about this going on, not something far away from there, outside of their control. Or, at least, not just about distant planned wars.

“We’re not doing that now. That’s the last thing I need.”

At that, Zinnia snapped. Since when was this one-sided enough that her own side didn’t matter as much?

“I’m not looking forward to being your side bitch until I’m old and grey,” she just said. *If you still want me by then.*

Deep down she knew it was impossible to hide her disappointment that Olivier thought she would be content to just be an extramarital affair—if Olivier ever married anything, she would marry her job—all her life. But still Zinnia tried to sound nonchalant and unbothered.

Why wasn’t this as important to Olivier? Was it just because she was scared of the political backlash? Would she be thrown of her throne made of swords and blood if people found out she was seeing someone, as some humans liked to do?

Olivier, though, replied calmly.

“You’re not my anything. You’re you, and I’m me. We simply find ourselves in these shared circumstances.”

“I’m not your side bitch,” Zinnia repeated. “I don’t know what the hell you soldiers have on that front, but I’m not it.” She sighed. “I want them to know one day. One day I’ll grow tired of playing around.”

“You’re not my side bitch,” Olivier said. “I hope this proves it.”

And she leaned down, even with Zinnia on her lap, to get the flowers from beneath the table where she’d been keeping it since morning. Olivier didn’t dare look for signs of wear on the petals, she just put the flowers on the table and glanced up at Zinnia, waiting for her reaction.

Now, more than ever, she hoped it would act as distraction.
“I’m told there’s fields of them in the spring and summer. The sunlight makes their colors less intense. Must be a beautiful spectacle to witness,” she said. “But… I don’t need an entire field of them, nor the sun, to witness beautiful. I only need you.”

Poetic, but rather dull, considered she had just admitted, against Zinnia’s wishes, to wanting this to remain a secret for a bit longer.

Of course, she was forgetting that if Zinnia meant to keep on with the conversation, they would just continue with it. In the end, nothing Olivier did had the power to change the topic, but Zinnia stared at her for a few seconds and gave up.

There would be plenty of time to discuss what they hell they were going to do when none of them would turn it into a fight. Neither wanted, really, to turn it into a fight.

And thus the distracting power of the flowers worked on both of them.

“They’re zinnia flowers…” Zinnia muttered, picking one flower up in her hands, fingertips brushing the fuchsia petals.

“They are.” I thought it might distract you from everything.

And she had been right to.

“You got me,” Zinnia said, laughing when she realized the pun. She didn’t, for once, remember her aversion toward flowers and having been named after this very one. Zinnia elegance, to her, had always been a cruel joke her parents had thrust upon her without warning nor question. “This is… this is stunning. Thank you.”

“You weren’t supposed to be this happy about it.” Olivier admitted.

Zinnia turned on top of Olivier to glare at her sweetly. “Oh, so you did it to piss me off?”

“Absolutely.”

Zinnia softened. She couldn’t help but smile.

“Well, I love it. I definitely love it. This might just be the one flower I don’t hate.”

If you ever hated yourself, Olivier thought, I’d be right by your side trying to show you how to love yourself again.

“It’ll die in the cold…” she said instead. Cold, ever so cold, as the weather that might murder this one flower and slowly blow out the flame inside Zinnia’s heart. Cold, ever so cold, because she had never been shown how to be anything else. Even in softness, her heart was made of ice, and its core would always be, no matter if the rest of it ended up thawing.

“I don’t care,” Zinnia muttered. “I’ll press-dry it. I want to have it forever.”

I want to have you forever, Olivier thought in reply.

And all of this almost had the power, the inner magic, to make her forget there were now several secrets in her life she had no way of truly controlling, because they slithered away from her fingers onto the battlefields where she fought, and they didn’t decide her fate, even if they did challenge her to come conquer it.
Buccaneer wouldn’t leave Miles alone ever since it was official that Miles had to organize who went on the Flower Route first batch. He had been after an opportunity like this longer than he could remember, and every time he’d been turned down for the job on account of his age, and more possibly his impulsiveness on the field.

Today, again, they sat at the lounge and Buccaneer was invading Miles’s personal space.

“But explain to me why I can’t.”

“You don’t need to have it explained to you!” Miles complained.

“Yes, I do. I don’t understand why you’re saying no.”

“Because you lead your department and that’s it.” Miles told him to see if that helped get him off his back. It was impossible to change Buccaneer’s mind once it had set on something he wanted, and Miles didn’t even know why he was still trying, only that he had to keep at it until it magically worked.

It never did. Buccaneer always had an answer ready.

“Let me lead something else, then.”

Miles stopped nursing his coffee and pretending he didn’t care. He’d gotten fed up. “It’s not up to me, Buccaneer. You know that. Now shut up and let me do my job.”

These days he carried his work everywhere on the fort, even on breaks. Choosing candidates seemed like an easy job until he realized there were hundreds of men in the fort whose profiles he’d need to study with this particular mission in mind.

“It’s not up to you now?” Buccaneer said, rubbing salt on the wound. “I thought you’d been appointed chairman of choosing people for the new route. A route proposed by my department.”

“Exactly.” Miles replied. “Your job there is done. You’ve performed admirably and what you have might—” Not that he did believe it. “—help. But your job now is to make sure our batches have everything ready. We need you behind the scenes, not first line in the snow.” He managed a sad smile to soften the blow of his words. Buccaneer saw right through it; he slammed his cup of coffee on the table.

“Don’t give me the puppy eyes, Miles. It was worth a try, anyway.”

“She calls the shots. If you really want this, just ask her again. Eventually you will wear her down,” Miles joked. “Like you wear us all down.”

It was his superpower, to get what he wanted how he wanted and convince people they had given it to him of their own free will.

“It’s not about wearing anyone down,” Buccaneer grumbled now. “She’s made it clear enough she won’t put me there. I was hoping that she trusted you enough to not look at the list you gave her.”
Miles couldn’t help but smirk at that thought. As if…

“She would have to be very distracted in order not to double-check.”

“Oh, I believe she is,” Buccaneer said, cracking his knuckles. “There has been flirtatious waiting for Zinnia outside of my department door.” Waiting very subtly by the door, foot on the wall, and looking up ahead like Olivier wasn’t doing something obvious that Buccaneer would thrive on for days. “That can only mean one thing.”

Miles smiled fondly. So much time chasing this one truth, weaving the threads to make it become a reality, and now they could stop running after it at last.

He sighed and drank his coffee.

“It’s working,” he said. “It worked.”

“I was right.” Buccaneer boasted of it, as if he hadn’t always been, as if he hadn’t always seen right through Olivier’s moods and those pieces of paper scattered across her desk. He had seen it before anyone else ever had, and this merit belonged to him and him only. Miles was happy as a bystander.

“It hurts me to say this,” Miles said, laughing. “But… you made it work, yes.”

Buccaneer laughed as well and patted his shoulder with thunderous force.

“Now,” Miles said, serious again. “You made her happy, are you going to let her make you happy now?”

Buccaneer turned his head to the side. He wasn’t sure how to answer that. She certainly wasn’t trying to make him happy, of all things she could be making him.

Miles shook his head and sighed.

“The house,” he clarified. “Are you going to rent that house we saw in Iver?”

“Obviously not.”

“Well, you need a home somewhere, and somewhere to start.”

Buccaneer shook his head. He wouldn’t allow that to happen. He wouldn’t be accepting defeat so soon when he still had full months to prepare. Where he would end up mattered so little compared to what he still had, the people he could still share his life with.

“I don’t need a parent to choose a house for me, Miles. I can choose myself. I will find something.”

Something close enough, something dry and small, something where he could live alone without drowning to the silence. For decades he had shared this fort with a community, asking him to leave it all for good to live in perpetual silence felt like torture to him. He was not used to the lack of noise, he would perish in boredom if left alone too long in the snow, just hearing the wind move and the trees rustle. He wanted the chaos this fort breathed out as if it were oxygen.

“I’m just saying… its November already. Time is eventually going to run out, and then what? She will kick you out, you know that. She will have to and she won’t hesitate.” Miles sighed. “I know her well enough to know she won’t take mercy on us when the time comes.”

Buccaneer raised his eyebrow, questioningly.
“Us?”

Miles looked down at the few inches of coffee he had left.

“Yeah, it’s not just you,” he said. “That woman will see us all leave Briggs, I’m sure of it.” He looked Buccaneer in the eye now. “So… please, if only to make it easier on all of us, go along with it, huh? Iver is fine, but I’m sure if you ask she’ll let you build your own home a few miles off town. Just… pick something, move it along, yeah?”

And he patted Buccaneer’s arm, his eyes suddenly sad. Lately he had forgotten his closest friend in this place was soon to leave the fort’s numbers to live a quiet simple life. The irony of Buccaneer being sent to live that kind of life struck Miles as absurd, but necessary. Eventually, the day would come each and every soldier in Briggs would see their military days end and evolve into days of retirement by a lake, drenched in the purest of silences. And he didn’t know a man who would fear that day more than Buccaneer himself did.

“Don’t look at me like this!” Buccaneer complained. “It’s my whole life, how exactly do you prepare to leave your entire life behind?”

Miles suddenly went quiet. That was a question Buccaneer hadn’t thought through, because Miles knew the answer to it better than anyone, no matter how tough life had been on them. Miles had left his home, been shunned everywhere because of his skin- and his eye-color, and he would have met a quick death if he hadn’t landed himself at the feet of Major General Armstrong. His life had ceased to be a life the day he had left the town where he’d grown up to never return, because of the war that labeled everyone of direct Ishvalan descent as an enemy to Amestris. He had been a soldier, sworn to protect the Amestrian people with his life. And now those people wanted that life to pay for crimes that had never been committed. Then the slaughter, the genocide of his people in Ishval…. The turning cities into ash and sand.

For the longest time, Miles had walked on because the alternative was to become ash, too. And he had wanted to live. He had fought for a new life, different from the one he had walked away from.

*How exactly do you prepare to leave your whole life behind?*

“You don’t,” he admitted in low voice. “It’s never behind you. It’s never behind you.” he repeated solemnly. “But that doesn’t mean you’re not allowed to move elsewhere. Your whole life doesn’t just disappear because you change paths. Mine hasn’t, and I left more than just one life behind…”

He had left thousands of lives, perishing in the sand, trespassing the boundary between Amestris and desert, between Ishval and vastness. And what he had found, while it didn’t fill the hole that war had carved in his chest, it did show him that life went on even if you thought you’d outrun it.

The uneasiness hadn’t left her fort. If anything, it had found a way to hide in plain sight from everyone, while still making its slow but sure way into all of their hearts. It brought the cold with it, and in the doors of winter more cold could only turn frost into ice so thick nothing could break it.

Olivier barked orders, as if no time had passed since the year before. She no longer paused and made an effort to be nice, which she openly admitted to having never done, and simply walked around in silence, never stopping to greet anyone, never looking up from her feet. Her frown, too, had become a permanent feature on her face, once so vividly happy.
This face was the face of a woman born out of war and reshaped inside it. War made her tenser and ruder, and she couldn’t help it. It was the defense mechanism that had already won her one war.

Now, at the heart of a feeble but still-standing truce, she heard the whispers of war, people muttering between them all over the place, no matter the impact she’d thought her words had had. Olivier never got to hear the full sentences that made her body shake at the thought of what Central was planning, the war they were brewing in their cauldrons like soup, but she knew they never ended well. These things rarely did, and this time she was bound to sit and do nothing, because there was nothing she would be allowed to do.

And even if she could send troops over there—spies, even—to make sure she had an idea of what to expect in the future, Olivier knew she wouldn’t risk lives over this information when they were all so far up north. She wouldn’t endanger her soldier’s lives. And her own, she could not risk. For them.

And, on top of it all, it wasn’t just the war. Ever since that day, when she’d broken into a yellow house to rescue a flower from the gelid winds of fall, it hadn’t been just the war.

Now she had a flower girl in the fort’s mist who clearly missed the life she hadn’t wanted and now thought over, like one ponders whether their decisions have been right. Olivier couldn’t give Zinnia answers to those sort of questions. All she had known was a life far from her family home, a life she had built brick-by-brick with her own toughened hands, and if asked to say anything, she would have reassured Zinnia that she was okay right where she was, with Olivier.

But Olivier knew how selfish of a claim that would be, so she simply hoped Zinnia’s blue days would settle into something a bit more stable. When they didn’t, Olivier herself grew uneasy, like everything in the fort was these days.

And, unfortunately, she snapped, brittle like she had never been. Olivier Armstrong hadn’t regained her legendary strength by going back to her notorious moods, she had turned into a pitiful creature in the eyes of the one she loved most—and what was worse, she had no clue how to step out of it. Every time she spoke, grumbling and sneering, she could feel the words leaving her but she was never able to stop them.

They were getting ready for bed, after another anodyne day, and Zinnia had quietly commented on the lack of empathy Olivier seemed to be showing lately. Zinnia had witnessed her yelling at Miles to get the list for the new route ready now, and at that time she had known to step aside, but now that Olivier’s mood seemed to have calmed down, Zinnia couldn’t keep it to herself. She hadn’t liked what she’d seen, and she was well-aware that despite Olivier’s famous demeanor, she had never seen it before in the months she’d spent at the fort.

Olivier, though, didn’t take the comment well. She didn’t engage in a verbal spar, because of the late hour and how tired that made her, but her words were hurtful and meant to be so.

Zinnia’s eyes opened wide, and she was suddenly so very still on their bed. For a moment, she remained like that, unable to look away from Olivier’s frowning eyes. Then, when she seemed to have regained some soundness of mind, Zinnia promptly stood up.

“Where are you going now?” Olivier asked, realizing now what she had done.

Zinnia, though, replied calmly, her eyes not teary but deeply sad.

“I’ll join the patrols,” she said, “and come back when you’re less… like this.”

And she grabbed the jacket of her uniform from the chair at the desk, putting it on before she left,
careful not to let the door slam behind her.

Olivier sighed, tired beyond exhaustion. She had stepped over a very clear line that her tired eyes, blurry after so many hours of work, hadn’t been able to see until she’d trespassed it. She rubbed at her eyes now and slowly stood to her feet and went after Zinnia to fix this before it grew bigger, like a snowball rolling down a hill.

Olivier opened the door and saw Zinnia was still close enough that she wouldn’t have to chase after her like she might have otherwise.

“Come on,” she said from the door, her tone slightly less potent than usual because she didn’t want to accidentally wake anyone up and let them in on this. “It’s late and you don’t have patrol. Don’t pick up a fight.”

“I’m not,” Zinnia said, obviously tired too, as she spun around. She crossed her arms right away, tightly. “But you are. So go get some sleep, I’m not in the mood.”

She tried to walk away again but Olivier’s voice stopped her:

“Zinnia.”

“No,” Zinnia said firmly, ignoring with all her heart the knot in her chest and throat that threatened to spill tears very soon if she didn’t remove herself from that situation right away. “I don’t like being spoken to like that, okay? I don’t know what the hell is going on and I’m not going to ask if you don’t want me to, but it’s not my fault.” She paused. “I’m going to take a walk. Go to bed.”

And she left the way she’d originally meant to.

Olivier stared until Zinnia had disappeared into the stairs, hopeful till the last second, then she went back inside to change into her sleepwear.

She glanced at the empty bed and almost asked it to disappear, but beds wouldn’t follow her command. Instead, she resigned herself to the facts and just got under the covers.

She knew she wouldn’t be able to fall asleep. She never had, not this soon, and let alone without the company she’d gotten used to hugging at night. The mattress felt vast like an ocean without Zinnia there, but she still tried to ignore that, hugging one of the pillows tight against her chest as she let all of her air out.

All she saw in her head when she closed her eyes, though, were armies made of children of alchemy, spitting fire and creating tsunamis at their back, and her brother’s young face was in every one of those children’s, everywhere she looked.

At first, she pretended the image wasn’t there and conjured nicer ones, of times old and past, even of Drachma, to channel her frustration somewhere known to her, somewhere safe. Somewhere that made sense to her logical self as much as to the emotional one.

Olivier tossed and she turned, but the war grew bigger in her mind. The fire swallowed entire villages, and the alchemists kept walking forward like inquisitors, feeding its flames with every step that they took. Alex was the first man, the one who lead them, and she finally stirred, uncomfortable, and opened her eyes.

There would not be any sleeping for a long while now.

*Must this war chase me even if I’m not dreaming? Awake or asleep, it’s there.*
She kept seeing what she’d always tried to repress into nothingness.

Her brother, a youth who wanted to join the military, not as a soldier but as an alchemist. Her enemies, drenched in their own blood and fallen to their knees before her.

But the prize of her victory was losing who she loved, losing them to the very war, at its very inception. Wars separated more than they could ever hope to unite. Armies gathered and countries formed alliances, but families broke, relationships snapped. Who would Olivier be losing in this scheduled war of Central’s?

_Not Zinnia_, she begged. _Not her. Not my troops, not my ... friends. Not my family._

And that was what they all were, Olivier’s family. She had lost her biological one time ago, of her own accord. Losing the family she had built, stone by stone, step by step, would be too painful. Because this time it would not be her choice to lose it.

Whatever was going on that she couldn’t tell anyone yet she would have to bear in silence, carefully, always on the lookout to find out what it meant, and she would have to learn not to take it out on the people she, in her silence, hoped to be protecting.

Zinnia came back not long after, entering the room on tiptoe to not wake Olivier up, but Olivier wasn’t sleeping. She was lying on the bed, looking at the night sky.

Zinnia got into the bed very slowly, because she thought her deep asleep by now, and Olivier just lay there, holding her breath and trying not to disrupt her as she listened to Zinnia’s own breathing slowing down until her voice reached Olivier’s ears:

“I don’t need you to be soft,” Zinnia whispered, making sure their bodies weren’t touching. “I’m fine with you being like this. If I’d wanted soft, I would’ve returned home a long time ago.” _Even after you kissed me_, she thought to herself, no matter if she knew that wasn’t entirely true. She had known, back then, that she wanted all of Olivier, cold and terrifying, warm and lively like a bumblebee, and that she wouldn’t flinch at any of it. Because back then she had already known what hid beneath the impregnable wall of Briggs.

Olivier licked her lips and replied, softly and very much aware of her own emotional limitations, now especially challenging because of all the worry:

“No, you definitely don’t want soft. You’re in the hardest, coldest place in the country.” _With the hardest, coldest person in it_, she added in her mind.

“But—” Zinnia noted. “—I do need kind. Not nice, not soft, not even loving. Just kind. If there are things you don’t want to share, I understand. But don’t blame me for whatever those secrets cost you. I’m not the prize you pay for them.”

“I’m not very good at kind.” Olivier finally admitted, after some seconds of silence.

“That’s not true,” Zinnia said, turning on the bed to look at her. “You’re not good at _overtly_ kind. But no one here can beat you at caring.”

Olivier didn’t really know what to say to that, she had never viewed it that way. All that she knew was that life demanded certain things from her and that she had to do her utmost to deliver flawlessly. She had people depending on her every move, how could she not be extremely careful as to what that every move entailed?

With Zinnia, too, even her silence had a cost. And she wondered if many words wouldn’t help more
than keeping them to herself. If she was worried, it wasn’t just because of the problems with Central; Olivier also worried, more than she knew, that there was something wrong in Zinnia’s life that she hadn’t known how to spot before.

“Still…” Olivier said. “Lately I haven’t been the only one who’s had trouble with… kindness.”

Zinnia scoffed. “I hope that doesn’t mean me”

“Since Iver, you’d been… down,” Olivier commented casually.

Down, walking around like a person halfway between human and ghost, doing her duty but staring longingly out of Briggs’ windows and always being exceedingly quiet before bed. And Olivier now knew how much Zinnia liked to talk. It had been nothing but weird to watch her fade into that state.

Now, Zinnia didn’t deny that she had been a little sadder than usual.

“Yeah, and?” she said defensively. “Did you ever catch me taking it out on the rest of you?”

“Well, not exactly. But you’ve been withdrawn. That’s why I thought the flowers might… instill new emotions in you.”

Zinnia went livid, but she couldn’t talk herself out of finally making contact with Olivier again, finally pressing closer to her.

“You bastard,” she said. “You could have asked, you know?”

“I figured it might have to do with nostalgia.”

“Not just that,” Zinnia added. “I don’t even know what it has to do with, to be honest. But it’s not war, it’s not as important.”

She didn’t feel that anything she might ever achieve in life would ever stand at the same level at the things Olivier did every day that she woke up.

Olivier was an icon to most, regardless of whether they viewed her negatively or not. Zinnia was a nobody from a town no one knew, without a degree, without a career, without a goal. All she had was her life, and the promise of more time—but she couldn’t even be sure it would be plenty of time.

“Do you think I honestly care?” Olivier said softly. “It’s you. I will always think of anything that goes on your mind as important. So tell me.”

Zinnia sighed.

“I’m growing older away from everything I’ve known, which I left because it didn’t feel as mine. And… I don’t know, I guess I miss being that child, nestled securely in her dad’s nest.”

“What do you mean you’re growing older?” Olivier asked, frowning.

At first, Zinnia didn’t dare say it out loud from how petty it was in her head. Then she realized she would just have to or this conversation would fade into silence again. “I’m turning 29 soon.”

“Are you going to make me guess the day or…?”

“Why do you even want to know?”

“Because up to this point I’ve been trying to guess your age and I have found I’m terrible at it.”
“November 21st…”

Shit, Olivier thought, *that’s only a couple of days from now.* This information had caught her with her pants down. She hadn’t been ready for it. Zinnia had such a smile that anyone would have looked at her and called her a child of spring instead of fall, but there she was, a Scorpio who was afraid of her own age.

“And it’s 29, isn’t it? Sweet number.”

“I’m a year closer to thirty, and my life is as astonishingly bare as it’s always been. You have fought and won wars, kept an incessantly growing pool of men alive for fifteen years, and stayed sane in the middle of all of it.” Zinnia exhaled. “I’ve just… been heartbroken, angry, and a runaway. In that order.”

“There’s nothing wrong with running away if you don’t like where you are.” Olivier pointed out. She knew that first-hand, a runaway herself from a younger age than Zinnia. A runaway who didn’t regret being one and the things that running away had brought into her life, this woman in her arms included.

“Yeah, but…” Zinnia said. “I’ve really done nothing else. I’m an adult who has done nothing but serve meat and run the hell out of the butchery once I got tired of that. It’s a little embarrassing to be with someone who’s on the opposite side of the spectrum. And… yes, I imagine I have been a little bit pissed off lately because I was heavily reminded of the frugal life I could still be living if you hadn’t brought me here.”

Olivier smiled. Only Zinnia would use the word frugal here, a touch of the literary words swimming in her flower girl head.

“You’d be selling books and dessert,” she told her. “There would be nothing wrong with that.”

“That’s the wrong stage of life for me. That’s what I should have done in my twenties, not now.”

Olivier abstained from saying that Zinnia was still in her twenties.

“Not only am I a runaway but I also became one too late.” Zinnia scoffed. “Funny how things turned out…”

“Well, you’re not thirty yet,” Olivier said softly, later, after some silence. “But one day you will be, and you will discover the beauty of growing older than the age women are allowed to reach. There comes a point where you become… unstoppable.”

“Is that what happened to you?” Zinnia muttered, almost asleep now. The day had been long, the emotions too intense and too many, and she merely needed to sleep it all off. Maybe she would dawn in a better mood than she had lately. “Did age made you cold as stone?”

Olivier pondered the question, softly turning it around to see it from all angles as Zinnia slowly melted into sleep by her side. She brought forth the memories of herself as a teenager, a young woman, and as a full-fledged general of the Amestrian military. She *had* used to be a mellow thing, a creature wrapped in fleece and silk, bowing to who she was taught to, but deep within she had always had the spirit of the burning phoenix, the ferocity of the bears of the north, and the cunning nature of the foxes in her fairytales. She had just been taught to suppress it for society to consider her acceptable, she had just never known how powerful it all together could be. Until she had grown older, until age and experience had taught her how to use it.
But it had always been there.

Olivier waited until Zinnia was asleep to reply. She gently touched her cheek with her knuckles, as if caressing a new bloom with trembling fingers.

“No…” she finally answered. “Age didn’t turn me into a cold general. Circumstance did, much earlier than you’d think. And… one day, maybe, if you’re up for it, I’ll tell you the whole story. But tonight I’d rather you rested a little. It’s going to be a crazy next couple of days…”

Chapter End Notes

Big news! I'm literally a few scenes and an epilogue away from finishing Adversity!!!! As some of you might know *wink wink* I've been debating for a while about what to do once it's all done. Should I post every chapter at once and consider the fic done? Or should I keep the usual weekly schedule? In the end, I've made a little 7-day poll in Twitter so I can have an idea of what this smol and beautiful readership wants. Bear in mind, though, that I'd like to take some time with the revision of every unpublished chapter before posting everything at once, if that's the most popular option in the end.

Aside from that, I hope the teeny tiny Whitney Houston reference was much appreciated - I love that song omg
The here and the now

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

And next year it will be thirty...

And what was Zinnia going to do when she turned thirty? She should have bought a house already, procured herself a nice job that paid well and found someone to split the bills with, and a year short of all of those deadlines weighing in on her she still hadn’t done any of the above.

She was stuck up north. In bed with a woman that sprawled over the mattress, no matter how big it was, when she slept comfortably. And without a single clue of what she would do after winter was over, although she should not have been thinking about any of that.

Winter, per se, still hadn’t begun. That meant she still had time to figure out her life.

Going or staying, I kind of choose neither. I want all of the in-betweens.

Not that there were any.

Whether she went back to Iver until she got tired of it or stayed her in a fort that could never be her real home, eventually reality would catch up to her. On another one of the birthdays, on the next one.

She really did not partake of the fact that finally she had turned twenty-nine.

It dawned and the sun woke her, because her gift would be to see it. A gift and a reminder that one more day had gone by, and that she had another chance to make it right or fuck it up.

Zinnia felt, for reasons she knew well but chose to ignore, that it was pre-fucked up already. Birthdays were for people with normal lives and normal families that would throw them a party and give them a cute present, not for grown-ups like her that were still lost in their own lives, navigating without direction nor heading, and just hoping to see land someday.

She looked at the sunbeams for as long as her eyes could take it.

They brought life forth. The real, true colors of the few pieces of furniture Oliver owned came alive when the sun hit them. The rest of the time they were dull and dark, perpetually dancing beneath Briggs’ grayness.

“Happy birthday,” said a voice muffled by the pillows between them. Olivier both fought the bed and gave in upon it every night. Zinnia had stopped trying to find a coherent explanation or a solution.

“Shut up,” Zinnia growled, turning on the bed and smashing her head against her pillow. “Don’t remind me.”

“Come here,” Olivier said. “I’ll remind you if I want to.”

“No…” Zinnia complained feebly as Olivier dragged her closer, teasing.

“Yes.”

“No, no, no. We’re going to be late.”
“I’m in charge. I can afford to be late.”

Olivier finally got Zinnia to stop resisting and buried her nose in Zinnia’s neck, an arm around her waist.

“But I can’t. And if neither of us show up, then…” And Olivier let her go. Zinnia knew what she had done, Olivier always froze up at the slightest hint of people knowing.

But today Olivier shouldn’t have.

Zinnia sat on the edge of their bed and picked up her clothes from the chair, changing into the black undershirt.

Olivier pushed the covers back and sat as well. She curled her hand around Zinnia’s, she had clearly noticed the mood she was in.

“Don’t.”

Olivier let go of her hand. “Okay.”

Zinnia turned to meet her eye.

“No, I don’t mean it like that,” she said. “I just… It’s not going to be a good day, okay? It’s not personal, it’s just… weird.”

And she knew she was behaving like a two-year-old who gets angry at turning three and not being able to say they were two anymore, but she couldn’t help it. The alternative would be to turn into a mini Olivier for the day, and that would only confuse the two of them even more.

If she was going to allow herself her feelings on this day, she would do so warning everyone else—or at least the one who saw more of her—that things wouldn’t get pretty.

“Okay,” Olivier just said, dragging herself to the edge of the bed to get dressed as well. It didn’t bother her that things would be this way, other than they were disrupting her mildly built plans for today. But she could understand why they wouldn’t work.

Zinnia was not her usual self today, and she had to respect that and let it pass, the same way Zinnia had put up with her own bullshit lately.

Ready at last, Zinnia stood up, way faster than Olivier.

“Buccaneer’s must be waiting for me already.”

Olivier didn’t tell her that it was still fairly early.

Zinnia just stood there, staring at her, looking dubious until she quickly took a few steps towards her and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

“See you,” she said, opening the door.

“See you…” Olivier said to the closed door once she was gone.

Zinnia walked to her job station directly. She didn’t stop for breakfast and nor did she want to. Her stomach was closed as tightly as a rock. All she could think of was Central, what would be going down there today.
She couldn’t lie to herself and pretend they hadn’t remembered. They always had, when she’d lived somewhere she could be reached. And this year they would have too, only they would have no number but Olivier Armstrong’s to call, and Zinnia doubted they would do that just to wish her a happy birthday.

Sitting on her chair, waiting for Buccaneer, Zinnia lost herself in thought. Her dad would have been the first to remember the day, coming to greet her on her bed with a huge smile on his face, and she would have acquiesced and let him hold her in his arm, rocking her as if she was a baby. He was the only one allowed to remember her birthday and celebrate it in any way with her, and deep down Zinnia was always happy to see him push past her insecurities into her heart. She would truly miss that today, today she was alone. Here, nobody knew her like he had, and nobody—except maybe one person—would ever get to that point.

As the day advanced, too, she knew her father would have made her cake and spent as much time as possible with her. He had that way of telling her he loved her, by sticking around even if it was in silence, reading something together. Sometimes, if she was writing, he would ask about it, and she would tell him.

Gently, Zinnia woke herself from the daydream of times past. She conjured the image of her mother instead, a harsh woman who would have made her get up at 5 in the morning on her birthday because there was work to be done, and then, perhaps, she might even give Zinnia a pragmatic present. A knife, a better sharper one than those she already had, and meat to practice with it.

And then, when she was off work, Anthony would come over with his eternal smile and sit down somewhere with her, long legs crossed, to talk about himself until he grew tired and left.

“Hello, hello”, Buccaneer announced himself into the room with words as well as his stomping. “What’s the little city girl doing here so early? Had night shift or something?”

That erased the images in her mind, but not the emotions they had left behind. She barely nodded at him, trying to focus on whatever it was they would do today.

That life she had thought up again on such a day wasn’t hers to taste anymore and they would be remembering her alone.

So, Olivier knew now Zinnia was not in the mood for any surprises. In spite of herself, after finding out a few days prior that it was Zinnia’s birthday, she had set her mind to work and she had concocted a little something. Not to celebrate, not exactly, but perhaps to praise the life of Zinnia. In the hope, maybe, that it would lift her spirits more than the flowers had. Or, at the very least, distract her from the day in itself and remind her that she was loved. Very much so.

Olivier just wasn’t very good at displays of affection.

Her normal idea of something special boiled down to going to the top of the wall to admire the sunlight interweaved between the mountains, and whenever she did indulge in romantic pleasure she always did it head-on, always pragmatically, always thinking first and feeling later.

Today she would have liked to make something useful out of that defect of hers. She would have wanted to cancel their plans for the day, alert everyone she wouldn’t be available for consultation today, and just take Zinnia somewhere in the mountains, wherever she wanted to go spend a quiet morning.
At first, Olivier had thought of that lagoon where once Briggs soldiers had gone for food, in times long past, but it would be too cold to really enjoy what it had to offer other than the sights. It would be just another version of seeing the sunlight, with a twist. After they had returned from their morning spent somewhere far from Briggs’ chaos, Olivier would do what terrified her the most, but she would do it in the name of the specialness of the day. She would have gathered everyone to tell them it was Zinnia’s birthday and that such a day should be celebrated by everyone, honoring her life for a few hours in whatever way they all found proper. And then, as they all mingled together in the lounges, Olivier would break it to them that all they had been gossiping about for a long time was actually happening, right under the noses, and would continue to, if Zinnia saw it fit.

And, maybe, despite the panic in her chest, Olivier’s emotions would have bubbled up and she would have kissed her right there, in front of god and everybody. And, maybe, being afraid of going public wouldn’t have mattered if that made Zinnia happy.

If that meant Olivier was making it all up for the other night, when she had been harsher than she’d meant. If that made up for everything else, too. For her lack of valor, in those spring and summer months; for the way she had rescued Zinnia as if she was just any stray; for denying her feelings until the very last second, until she’d realized Zinnia would never come back to hear them be spoken of out loud.

Now, though, seeing what the situation was, Olivier might as well just postpone it. It was better to cater to Zinnia’s actual needs than make of this day a flamboyant occasion when Zinnia didn’t want it to be. There would be plenty of time for dramatic confessions another day, and that way Olivier would be able to plan it better, according to her own needs and worries.

With a sign, she resigned herself to spending another normal day, with the exception that now she couldn’t escape the concern over whether she was doing the right thing.

She crossed Buccaneer on her way to the office, and she made sure to look distracted enough that he wouldn’t stop to talk to her. Sometimes she thought she was way too personal and lenient with her subordinates… But what could she do, really? The damage was already there.

The smell of fresh gossip in the morning lifted Buccaneer’s spirits as a rule. It didn’t matter what hid behind it, he could always welcome a little bit of activity around the fort that made its way to his circle. In a world where they barely had time to sit down and read stories or even concoct them (Miles often said Buccaneer had a writing talent), having fiction of any kind, including gossip and interpretations of said gossip, felt like a blessing, as if this place was much more of a home than it was a bastion for war.

Buccaneer appreciated having something to do that didn’t involve preparing for other people’s wars, and sometimes even he realized how selfish it was to appreciate something that may be harming other people’s lives.

Like this thing that had Olivier acting much more distant than it was usual in her these days. Whatever it was, Buccaneer told himself not to think up any strange theories about it. After all, it was none of his business.

That is, until he walked into his department and found that Zinnia had the same defeated expression to her than Olivier had. His gossip senses tingled, avid to find out more about it. He had to shut them down a little and just play it from the usual casual and joking angle.
“Hello, hello. What’s the little city girl doing here so early? Had night shift or something?” Buccaneer said, dropping his coat on the back of his chair and sitting down. “What’s with the long face? Someone died? When’s the funeral?”

“No one died…” Zinnia murmured angrily.

“What’s that?”

“No one died!” Zinnia said.

Buccaneer backed off for a moment, not really sure what was going on. This anger wasn’t typical of her in the slightest.

“Ah, nice, then. For a second there I got scared, thought someone might have. Or was it just your cheerfulness?” He grinned, clearly under the impression that this was the correct strategy to follow if he wanted to appease her. “I think I preferred you when you hummed. Now you seem to want to shoot at the papers.”

Zinnia controlled herself and didn’t say anything, but she wished deep in her heart that she would say a couple of things to this man who thought he had the right to inquire in this manner without consequences. If she had been Olivier, she wouldn’t have kept quiet.

But all she could do now was bite down on her tongue and keep looking at the budgets in front of her.

“Did you argue with the missus or something, kid?” Buccaneer asked further, unaware of what he was causing within her. Zinnia felt like a volcano about to erupt and simultaneously like the base of rock on top of it that prevents the lava to spill. ‘Cause she’s looking just as angry and gloom as you are, and boy… I know confrontation when I see it.”

“You know nothing,” Zinnia finally spoke up. “And even if you did, what makes you think I have the slightest bit of interest in your opinions about my private life? We’re here to work, so let’s work.”

Buccaneer watched her for a second. Was she serious? He had never seen her this way.

“Damn, no need to get all petty, Zinnia. I was just teasing.”

She bit her lip once again, shutting her eyes and holding back. She reminded herself that she had no authority and no voice, and that whether she wanted to say would leave Buccaneer’s brain as soon as she’d finished saying it, but… she still exploded.

She pushed her chair away from the desk.

“You know what, you seem to forget that there are lines, which you’re are so intent on crossing so very often. We’re not friends, even if we’re friendly to each other. And just because you know the truth to certain aspects of my life that may intersect with yours that doesn’t give you the right to either pry or insult me with that knowledge. So if you don’t mind, I’d rather you shut the fuck up and let me work, if you’re not going to work yourself.”

Buccaneer gulped and shut up, not at her request but rather at how astonished her words had left him. He always expected such a reaction from Olivier and her gigantic moods, but Zinnia? He could have never seen it coming, not even after a while of hardcore teasing her about Olivier. He wondered what could have happened to the two of them for Zinnia to be this way. And, of course, he didn’t mention anything else to her the whole day, not even to ask her if she could pass him the papers she was working on.
He’d survived as much anger as he thought he could for one morning.

On the other hand, Zinnia was grateful for the response to her words. The last thing she would have wanted to deal with today was Buccaneer’s insistent questions and rhetoric, when it was clear she was not going to divulge anything to him.

Thankfully, what she had said and how she’d said it had scared him into silence. She could see him watching her out of the corner of his eye, waiting for the perfect moment to be civil again, but he never dared to.

And once lunch time neared, Zinnia left early, not bothering to say goodbye to him. She’d probably apologize for this tomorrow or later this week, just not today. Today she had earned the right to being angry and gritty.

She waited at an empty table in a corner for the longest time. It was customary now that Olivier and her would have lunch together, careful not to speak too loudly about personal matters and extra careful not to hold hands or touch each other in the slightest. But today Olivier didn’t show up, and eventually Zinnia had to get up and go get her lunch.

It felt strangely alienating to be there alone. But she knew to associate it with her mood. People weren’t coming to sit with her because they had seen her face at a distance and figured out, however rudimentarily, that today wasn’t her day.

Today was nothing but not her day. One year older, one year more of burdens to carry that she didn’t know what the hell to do with… Perhaps it was better to shoulder it alone for the time being, she would not act kindly if someone took the seat opposite her to talk or just have lunch together, not even if that someone was Olivier. And, to be frank, even less so.

She finished the rest of her meal in silence, took her tray back to its place and cleaned it, then she headed to the elevators. A while from now, she would have a place to be, and it wouldn’t hurt to be there sooner. She could sit somewhere and try to improve her mood.

She could sit at a place that smelled like good memories and try to remember that nothing had changed, that today didn’t change anything she had tried to build during the last couple of months.

Zinnia was here now, and that was what mattered. What had always mattered. The here and the now.

And… as she opened the door to the gymnasium, perhaps also the who.

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*No mercy, no in-between breaths*, Olivier observed. In spite of her habit of slowing down when fighting with Zinnia, lately it was taking her a bigger effort to do so, and she didn’t have as much time to observe as she liked to. *Doesn’t she feel the burn on her muscles?*

But Zinnia was unstoppable today. Such was her strength and determination that Olivier was sure she would have stopped in the way of a hurricane and managed to dissipate it into tiny breezes. Today, Zinnia could have moved a mountain.

And Olivier was scared she might, again. She had won one of their sparring sessions before, but Zinnia had always insisted on luck, never on skill. If she pushed a little harder—just a little—, she would beat Olivier in combat.
But Olivier didn’t want her to push past her own limits without a care in the world. And right now it seemed as if Zinnia’s sole purpose in life was packing a punch.

“Easy there or you’ll punch holes through the walls,” she said, pulling up her guard against Zinnia’s fists.

Her forehead was covered by a thin curtain of sweat, and her frown marred her entire face, turning it into a face born out of the ashes of war, not victory. Not even participation.

Olivier had never seen her like this.

“I’m not… strong enough,” Zinnia panted, “… to be able to.”

Before Olivier followed her instinct and landed one of her own hits, she just stopped all of a sudden, put her arm down, not breathing half as hard as Zinnia was, and eyed her carefully.

“You’re overtiring yourself,” she said. “That’s no way to train.”

Zinnia tried to engage immediately, lunging at her.

Olivier stepped away without effort.

“I’ll never learn otherwise”

But Olivier refused to be a participant in this. She put an open palm to stop Zinnia’s fist and Zinnia was made aware of how much **stronger** Olivier really was. She was blocking all of her intent with just one relaxed hand.

“You’ll never learn **like this**, being angry at something you can’t ever hit,” Olivier said, “no matter how many times you try to.”

Zinnia finally stopped, taking a hint. Her breathing echoed off the walls, and she was grateful they chose this time of the day to train so they wouldn’t have to do this in front of more people. She sensed a speech, and not precisely a nice little one that she did not deserve, which was why Olivier wouldn’t give it to her.

“Is this about the other night?” Olivier asked calmly.

That made Zinnia feel the heat of anger within her.

“It has nothing to do with you,” she grumbled.

Olivier raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. “Then?”

“It’s just not going to be a good day, okay? Don’t worry about me. Or about me being angry at you. I’m not.”

Zinnia avoided looking at her in the eye, and Olivier read between the lines and didn’t have to be especially observant to know what that meant.

“You are, though,” she said.

The day hadn’t been about that, that much was true. But Zinnia couldn’t deny that she still had this thorn dug onto her bones, bothering her with the slightest movement. The thorn of feeling, like the rest of the soldiers, that something was going on and not having the names for it nor the change to do something to figure it out or change it.
She quietened her breathing after a few seconds.

“A little,” she admitted. “I don’t like you keeping things from me.”

“It’s confidential. I’d rather you didn’t get involved.”

“And I respect that. It may anger me, but not enough to get me on a mood.”

Olivier walked the couple of steps that separated her from Zinnia and tipped her chin up. This was absolutely not the kind of behavior she demonstrated when she wanted to cheer up her troops, and yet she wasn’t thinking twice about it. It was, put simply, what she needed to do. Get closer, get in there, and be a partner, not a boss nor a trainer. Not a general, hard as that was for her.

“Still,” Olivier said, “my flower girl is moody today. Whatever caused it risks dueling your anger…and mine.”

Zinnia gently moved Olivier’s hand away from her chin.

“Don’t trouble yourself with that and let’s go again. I need to perfect this.”

It took Olivier a second to get back into position. She didn’t feel like pulling an argument out of her ass just for the sake of being a soft girlfriend. She had given Zinnia the perfect opportunity to talk about birthdays or whatever it was, to talk about secrets, all kept on Olivier’s end, or to just…ignore it like she had chosen to.

So Olivier moved like a resort, prepared to face Zinnia’s moods and whatever came with them. She almost smiled, too. It had been a long time since these training sessions were something that happened under the excuse of Olivier needing Zinnia to learn what soldiers knew. Olivier was now engaging in this because it elicited feelings in her that she didn’t have any more time to enjoy. And because Zinnia clearly needed to get it off her chest.

They shared dinner after sharing a shower. Both their moods seemed to have gotten a little bit better after some warm water and exercise. In the end, Zinnia hadn’t been able to come out victorious. Except she had, because once the fight was over, she didn’t feel as shitty as before and a few smiles had come out easily, with Olivier’s help. It was so ironic that the woman who she had to coax genuine kind humor out of was making her lose her mind laughing about the stupidest thing. For a second, Zinnia forgot what day it was and gave in to it.

At dinner they were caught up with the final rumors of the shower couple, as they were being called around the fort. Olivier smirked and drank beer at a heavy pace, glad to be off the radar even if it was for such a minute or two.

It made her breathe easy for only a few moments, though.

A thought had just come to her, a dormant thought that until now had only brushed the surface of her mind so very rarely, so very feebly. Yet now it had taken on the strength Zinnia had exhibited a while ago.

This could be my gift to her, Olivier realized.

She took a good look at the room. It was crowded, despite the early hour. Everyone was here: Buccaneer, Miles, Smith, Austin, Mauser… Sitting here and there, faces of old and new
acquaintances, all caught up as far as they could with her story.

And she had the immense power to be the one who finished that story in front of them, who confirmed it. She could do what she was so scared of doing, and in doing so she would be taking control over the narrative.

Out of the corner of her eye, her mind stopped everything to look at Zinnia, eating placidly and smiling at her own memories. No, Olivier thought, I can’t do this because of the narrative. I have to do it for her. This is what she wanted.

Confirmation. Here and now.

In front of god and everybody, Olivier made the decision to come clean, what Zinnia had wanted since the beginning, what Olivier had never been brave enough to choose to do.

Would she now?

And then she leaned in.

“I’m going to do something that’s both crazy and risky,” Olivier whispered to Zinnia. “And it’s selfish, and probably will come at a bit of a shock.”

“Do I even want to know what it is?” Zinnia was only able to whisper back.

“No,” Olivier said at once. “I don’t know. Do you?”

“Please tell me you’re not going to sing ‘happy birthday’ at the top of your lungs.”

The tension in Olivier’s chest dissipated.

“Of course not. I am not that corny.”

“Okay, then, on you go. I’ll cheer from here.” Zinnia allowed herself a tiny smile. Crazy and risky and selfish notwithstanding, this was the closest thing to spontaneity she was seeing in Olivier in a truly long time, and she definitely planned to sit comfortably somewhere and watch as that spontaneity became something solid.

“Come on up with me when I stand,” Olivier whispered again, tugging a little at Zinnia’s hand, insistently.

“What?” Zinnia chuckled softly.

“If you stand when I do, that means you trust me with whatever I’m going to do. If you don’t, then I’ll just pretend I want to get another serving and call it a day.”

“Olivier, what the fuck is going on in your head right now?” Zinnia giggled now. “You’ve lost me a little.”

Olivier combed her hair back; a rare gesture in her, so used to hiding behind her curtain of hair. And she stood up, leaning one final time towards Zinnia.

“I’m going to do what I should have done weeks ago.”

Zinnia was left gaping at her in utter shock, despite having been warned about what was going to happen and what she could or not do. She had no clue what was going on, but she did know one thing: she trusted Olivier. Probably with her life, but right now with something a lot less dramatic.
Determined, she stood up too.

Across the kitchens, Miles and Buccaneer sat on a corner of their table, happily indulging on their late dinner. When he saw, Miles’s jaw dropped. He tapped at Buccaneer’s left arm.

“What?” Buccaneer was presently shoving huge amounts of food into his mouth.

“Look up from your plate, you brute.”

He did. And immediately his spoon fell from his hand, his grip no longer strong at all.

Olivier cleared her throat. She was starting to be caught up with what she’d done and the consequences it would have, her mouth a little drier than before. I can’t give up now, I have to see this through.

“Gentlemen,” Olivier said for them all to hear. “Lady,” she said, looking right into Zinnia’s brown eyes by her side. She had to abstain from holding her hand. This was... perhaps not sacred, but paramount for her. To be doing this, for no other reason than because it was what her partner had always wanted... it compared to nothing else. A feeling settled in the center of her chest, rich and heavy like honey, warm like the evening sun in the first days of autumn. For a brief moment, Olivier forgot how full the room was, and what her words meant. She just spoke and felt, and let that carry her where it may. “We are gathered here today, as we do every night, and I am taking this opportunity to make a very important announcement.”

Zinnia blushed at her wording but didn’t interrupt her. She had stood up, she trusted her, and Olivier went on, ignoring the beating of her heart, wild like a horse on a prairie. She chained word after word and she couldn’t stop herself. Even if this turned out wrong, she was doing it. And there was certain bravery in that.

“Some of you may have already heard of this. As a rumor, as something else, perhaps even as a truth someone else sold to you. I intend on admitting to that truth.” This is it, Olivier thought. “For some time now, this woman right here—” Once again, her eyes met Zinnia’s. It was all about her, it had to be. She wouldn’t be doing this for anybody else, not for any of her sporadic visits to the wrong room in the academy, not for Ianthe, even. This was Zinnia only, as it should be. And Olivier gave a one-time part of her to something as unrepeatable as this one woman who had crossed Amestris back to her, when there hadn’t been a proper her to come back to. “This woman ... She has been sharing her life with me. Whatever led me to this moment—words, external action—” She said that last bit looking at Buccaneer, who was gaping at the scene as if he couldn’t believe what was happening. “Even fate, if you can believe it, I don’t know, and I don’t presume to ever find out. But tonight I simply wanted to make it public, at long last. I hope it eases your minds, and I hope it helps put an end to the circulation of all and any rumors.” Despite herself, Olivier smiled. “Because it is true. And it’s here to stay. And if anyone has any more doubts regarding the status of my relationship with
Zinnia, you all know where my office is.”

She plopped down back on her seat, and Zinnia followed a couple of seconds later, too shocked to react any earlier. She had just witnessed it, it had really happened, and… there was no turning back now. Even if they wanted to keep on denying it, everybody else already knew. The world was cracking itself open, pouring light out of the cracks, and Zinnia felt bathed in all of it. Suddenly, her anger and sorrow, present throughout the entire day, seemed to have been veiled for a few minutes.

And she couldn’t have been able to say if it was a shared mood. Everyone around them was still silent as a tomb, probably taken aback by Olivier’s invitation to openly pry into her relationship. An invitation that none of them had seemed to notice was not serious.

“I don’t think they’ve caught the irony,” Zinnia whispered to Olivier.

Olivier shook her head and raised her voice:

“It was a joke, people! If any of you so much as dare ask me anything about this, I’ll …” she paused for a second. She had no idea which threat would be appropriate for this. Was there anything she might be able to use from their code of conduct? Was it punishable to be curious about a major general’s private life? “…make sure you will have night patrol inside the fort for a month.”

There were several groans after that, especially at the mention of indoor patrols. If they had been at night and in the open air, they all might have pried just to get them. These men loved two things: gossip and sunrises.

And, thus, the magic dissolved and the room fell back into the typical mutters of the hour and the uncanny situation. Buccaneer’s sight fell back to his plate and his food, and most seemed to do as he did. Not Zinnia, though.

Zinnia could not stop looking at Olivier.

“You did it. You fucking did it…” she said, utterly surprised.

“I’m told I’m perceived as pretty fearless,” Olivier boasted. “The stories aren’t wrong about me.”

Zinnia arched an eyebrow. Even in her glee, she could tell how much truth there was in that statement. Olivier might have been a fearless leader, but in her personal life she had the same fears most people did.

“Lies,” Zinnia said. “You’re terrified of the backlash. We’re all scared of something, and you’re scared they’ll all see you differently now.”

Olivier thought about it. Fear? she thought. I don’t feel fear now.

“I’m not. Not really,” she said. “I don’t care. They know now, they can do whatever they please with that information. My conscience’s clear.” And it was. Finally, after so long, after so many doubts and her iron will to keep it hidden for as long as they could, she had been the one to dust their relationship off the shelves and show it to the world in the measure that they could be shown. All in the name of making this one girl smile on her birthday… “I have given you the birthday present you deserve, and that’s what matters.”

Zinnia wrapped her hand around Olivier’s, a little tentatively. It was the first time since the beginning that they had touched in public. Even knowing that now there was no danger, because now they could do this very thing everywhere without being afraid, she still felt like it was too bold and someone might reproach them for it. No one did, and if someone did look, all they sported was kind
smiles.

“Is that what that was?” she asked when she was a bit calmer. “A birthday present?”

How strange, not even the mention of her own birthday—be it cursed as ever—was capable now of erasing the gentle expression on her face.

It was Olivier’s turn to blush now.

“I had something else in mind, but you wouldn’t have liked it. This, though, I thought you might it appreciate a lot more.”

“I do.” Zinnia beamed.

“I’m… glad.”

“I’m only going to ask for something else in return.”

“And what is that?”

“When is your birthday?”

It made Olivier chuckle like never before, not caring who may be watching. But she told Zinnia anyway. “April 17th.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Some things have changed since last week: Adversity is already written and revised in its entirety. According to the poll on Twitter, you want me to keep posting weekly. I've made another poll - a permanent one - so more people can vote. To give you a bit of perspective: If I keep posting weekly, the fic officially ends for you on October 20th. For me it's already over and you have no idea how weird that feels, this story has been everything to me this past year and I'm having a bit of trouble processing the fact that it's over ^^

Anyway, I hope you're having a good week :3
She had promised to herself she wouldn’t do it, but as she stared at the pitiful excuse of a list Miles had provided her with so far she knew she would have no other choice.

Buccaneer would have to go out there, on to the snow he so loved and the unknown he loved even more. If there was someone in this fort that had as much thirst for the war awaiting past the border, that was Captain Buccaneer. And this sole fact entranced her and terrified her at the same time. She would handle herself when the war came, but would Buccaneer, ever so invincible he forgot he still bled?

Today, of all days, Miles had gone off on his occasional mid-day shift, and she had Zinnia perched on her lap as if they spent every waking moment like that, keeping her company while she worked. There was something fundamentally right about it. It felt good to have Zinnia’s weight on top of her, reassuring, somehow, that she wasn’t in danger of disappearing.

It was Zinnia, then, who saw her scribble Buccaneer’s name in the list for the Flower Route.

“Am I getting worse at reading your handwriting or does that say Julian?”

“It says Julian,” Olivier confirmed, leaving her pen flat on the table. “What other choice do I have?”

“Plenty,” Zinnia said. “It’s too soon to be drafting this when it’s possible Miles hasn’t even been able to get it around the whole place.”

“If gossip can travel that fast to get people to peep at us, then I’m sure official news must as well.” Not to mention that she’d gathered a significant portion of all her men so they would listen to her new proposal.

Zinnia put the paper away dramatically, pushing it further and further with one extended hand as Olivier kept her on her lap and prevented her fall to the floor and/or table.

“Give it time,” Zinnia said with one of those shit-eating grins that made Olivier want to lock the door, turn down the lights, and kiss her until their lips grew dry.

She was about to suggest such a thing when Zinnia promptly climbed off her lap.

“And where are you going?”

“Someone’s got to tell the man. I want to be there when he hears; might as well come from me.”

“You want to be there?”

“I deserve to laugh at his expense after he’s meddled so much in my life to make you happy.”

Olivier smiled.

“Well, I can’t say it hasn’t worked…” The smile turned into a smirk.

Zinnia lifted an accusatory finger.
“Don’t you dare play good cop now. You hated it,” she said.

“I don’t hate the happy part,” Olivier said, smug, intertwining her fingers with Zinnia.

Zinnia looked as if torn between two worlds.

“One quick peck and I’m out. I need to laugh at the man, it will be cathartic for me.”

“One quick peck,” Olivier promised.

And she delivered.

“Hello!”

She walked in—or, rather, skipped in like a little girl who had just gotten a lollypop. It was a rather peculiar feeling, after the turmoil of anxiety she had gotten those past few days, but she hung on to it. Maybe laughing at an old man for getting his long-coveted wish made her cruel, but it was at least lifting her spirits a little. Plus, she hadn’t come here only for laughter. She could do that well enough on her own without being present.

She had come down here because, deep down, she wanted to be the bearer of good news and make him as happy as he had made her and Olivier with his incessant meddling. An eye for an eye, and the world did not go blind but ever-seeing.

“Chirpy. I like it,” Buccaneer said, turning immediately to greet her with his eyes as well as his voice. “What changed? Did you make up with the ‘gf’?”

Gf? He’s said ‘gf’ out loud?

“Don’t use slang,” she said with a sly smile. “It doesn’t become you.”

“Did you, though?”

Zinnia sat down on her stool and crossed her legs.

“Kinda, yeah.”

“So now my girls are happy?”

He asked it so sweetly she almost didn’t notice the nuance. He had concocted this little union and now he took the credit, which truthfully did belong to him. At least a third of it did. Without Olivier’s interferences and Zinnia’s confirmation, his efforts would have left with the wind.

She raised an eyebrow. “Your girls?”

“Well, she’s always been my girl,” Buccaneer said, thinking out loud. “And you’re a recent acquisition, I wasn’t going to say girl and a half.” That made Zinnia smile. She knew well enough already that she wasn’t just a half of a friend to him. And he knew her chirpy moods well enough to figure out that probing a little would not hurt him: “So? What did she do to win you over?”

Zinnia blinked in confusion. “You saw.”

Buccaneer’s whole face suddenly became a beacon of light. “No…”
He had finally tied the loose ends into the conclusion that now he knew was right.

“Well, to be honest I would have gone running back to anyone who confessed their profound and forbidden love for me in a crowded kitchen,” he said, and proceeded to chuckle right after.

“Yeah,” Zinnia said.

“That’s one hell of a thing.”

“I know.” She blushed a little. To be honest, she hadn’t thought about it much, but her mood had instantly evaporated into something calmer the second Olivier had shared the news with everyone. If she had been able to ask for anything for her birthday, had she liked it, she would have asked exactly for what Olivier had given her. “Might as well have put a ring on me.”

“Not the type.” Buccaneer chuckled again. He patted her hand. “So, you’re less… angsty now, eh? Back to the old humming girlie I know?”

Zinnia looked down. She figured she had really been a bit grumpier than usual around him.

“Back to that, yes,” she said. “Now I don’t have to hide whether I love her or hate her. That’s… one hell of a thing,” she said, repeating his own words back at him for lack of better ones.

Buccaneer feigned to be offended, a lively hand placed on his clavicle.

“You tiny thing, kill me?? I’d like to see you try.” He had said the exact same thing to Olivier once. It had not gone well. She had won the spar, plugging him into a wall and making a dent on it for everyone to see. She hadn’t killed him—she hadn’t meant to—but her demonstration had been clear: she was stronger than the strongest man in Briggs.

But Buccaneer looked at tiny thin Zinnia, who barely had any muscle on her bones and had only been trained to fight the most rudimentary of fights, and could only laugh at her provocation.

She uncrossed her legs and frowned.

“Don’t mock me. I’m good with a knife. I can skin you,” she said.

She didn’t break eye contact for a few seconds, trying to intimidate him. He stared into her eyes and wondered if, truly, this child would be capable of such a thing. She had always been so civil, so mild… even in her anger. He couldn’t really imagine her gutting someone. At least, not until a few seconds had passed and he glimpsed a bit of the ferocity within her, something she could bring out at any moment, with terrible results for everyone else. He hoped she would preserve that for the wars to come.

Then, as intensely as it had come, her brown eyes became kind once more, and she crossed her legs again. This was the Zinnia he knew.

“Also, I almost forgot with the chitchat,” she said. “She’s approving you for the new route. You’re going out there, Buc.”

Her smile now was more than honest. She knew how much it meant to him to leave the fort, to be on his feet again to do something dangerous yet worthwhile to his people. He had been hungering over this particular task since the Drachman Wars.

“What!” he squealed. Of course, his expression, between surprise and absolute glee, was worth
coming down there to see it. And it did not make her laugh in the slightest. Instead, it made her heart feel light and happy. He deserved a chance, old as he may be, because Olivier could still and always use his tenacity. “I’m… going?”

*The poor thing can’t even believe it,* she thought.

“So she said. It’ll be just an inauguration, won’t last as long as it should. And that’s why she’s letting you go. I came down to tell you because she’s…” Zinnia sighed dramatically. “…busy preparing everything.”

Zinnia wasn’t even sure if Olivier would have wanted to come down here herself. On one hand, maybe he would have rejoiced in seeing Buccaneer’s eyes so vibrantly alive because of the news, but deep down Zinnia knew Olivier wouldn’t betray the image they all had of her, the image of a woman who had forbidden him to go on the MM batches for as long as he’d been missing an arm.

“You can tell her…” Buccaneer now was tearing up from joy. “Thank you from me.”

She smiled, wiping an indiscreet tear away, and planted a quick kiss on his cheek.

“I will, captain,” she said, and then she left with a nod.

She would never really know the extent of the happiness that had crossed the captain’s body at hearing the news that, at last, he would be of use to the same practices he was designing and doing budgets for. He would be once again part of it all, part of the action.

And he could never face Olivier about it; he would cry like a baby and she would sneer, even if deep down she was the first one to feel happy for him.

*I didn’t even have to pester her for this this time,* he thought. *She thought of me all on her own.*

He couldn’t deny, and nor could anyone, that the heart of the Ice Queen was warmer than rumor might have you believe.

Olivier had continued working during Zinnia’s absence. She saw no reason to just wait on her ass for however long it took Zinnia to tell Buccaneer the good news and probably make his day in much better words than Olivier herself would have.

Besides, she had some other things to be paying attention to aside from the list. Finding her beloved captain a home for next summer had turned out to be a more complicated task than she would have originally believed. Not only had he shown no predilection towards any of the options he had, but he also rejected any of her proposals. Iver was too tiny, building a cottage in the mountains would take free time which he didn’t have, and going as far as North City felt like betrayal to him. So, despite all her extensive looking, she still hadn’t found a place for Buccaneer to move out to.

And she had hoped, once, that this would be her one and only problem. But winter was here to stay and their rations were starting to grow stale and dull, always potatoes and meat and soup. The transports from North City came less and less and they had to make do with what they had. Since Zinnia didn’t involve herself in the kitchen, no one was really complaining; they were used to the worst of the worst. It characterized them, the brutes of the north.

To top her day off, Olivier had not been able to stop herself from remembering her past mistakes and her inability to make an invincible army out of her people. There were no signs of war yet, and she had no clue how to anticipate to them, but when there would be she wanted to be ready. And so far she had the same tools she always had: men and machinery.
God only knew what the other brutes on the other side of the border would bring to battle. She hoped her firepower could take them. After all, her only novel defense had been alkahestry, and she had failed at finding out how to use it, too.

The door to her office opened again after a longer while than Olivier had imagined.

“Done?”

Zinnia nodded and closed the door behind her. “He squealed. You could’ve done this much sooner, we could’ve ambushed him, made everyone see.”

“Everyone already knows what he is like. It wouldn’t have had the desired effect,” Olivier scoffed.

Zinnia gave her a pointed look, eyebrows almost up.

“Did you and I exchange moods?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then why are you being like this?”

Olivier rolled her eyes. She wasn’t being like anything. She was just… handling everything again, back in the old game of cat and mouse between victory and failure. Not defeat, because they would need an actual war and an enemy, but just failure. Inability to carry out what needed to be carried out.

Still, Olivier said nothing to the teasing.

Zinnia saw right through her, and as per usual, decided it was her chance to poke around a little bit until the truth came out. She was especially good at distracting Olivier with words until she chose all on her own to spill it out.

“Have you tried sleep?”

“Very funny.”

Zinnia sat down on her lap again, slowly, because she knew Olivier liked having her this close and in such an intimate manner. They wouldn’t do this with a public, but they had the entire office to themselves now and would still for a little while; she could afford this display of physicality while she tried to help.

“Have you tried thinking that that new route is probably gonna help lots?” Zinnia asked again.

“Not like it should,” Olivier replied.

“But it’s something, right? What else would you need to make it perfect?”

Olivier actually snorted at the question, and more than at the question, at the answer. “A miracle,” she said. And once she started speaking, more and more words came, all of them true and all of them stinging. “For Buccaneer to finally settle down, which at his age you would have thought he would have done already.”

Zinnia smiled. “Clearly he hasn’t…”

“Clearly.”
“Eventually he’ll move his ass and find a home, if he sees himself living on the snow.”

“Trust me when I say he won’t,” Olivier said. “He trusts me too much with his life, even if his mission in mine is to make it miserable. He won’t expect me to banish him.”

“He’s a good man,” Zinnia said, nodding. “We’re all looking for a solution. I’ve seen Miles reading up on houses and territories as well. Eventually, Buccaneer will give in to one of us. Together, we’re more stubborn than he is.”

“I’m half tempted to just push him to your place, if you’re—” Olivier glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. “—well … really staying here.”

The room felt quiet for some seconds. The thought of ‘staying’ was in the air like a trapeze artist, dancing with the dust, making itself visible, and none of those two women liked being aware of it.

“It’s not like I’ve made my choice about that. But it makes no sense for me to be at Iver.” Zinnia looked down. She didn’t want to say this looking at Olivier: “At least not immediately.”

Ah, so the girl wasn’t planning on staying in the fort forever? Olivier didn’t know whether that made her happy or saddened her more. Clearly, she couldn’t have stayed forever and this dream would eventually have stopped being so, but Olivier had always kind of thought that what would separate them in the end would be the laws of the military she was supposedly abiding by, not Zinnia’s own choice to leave.

She had been about to once, and Olivier had almost lost her.

In any case, even if she would be, too, almost losing her again, Olivier would respect the separation. It was the least she could do, after all the good times and all the lessons she had learned.

“Regardless,” Olivier said, shaking her head to drive those thoughts away, “I might have no other choice but to ask you to stay, at least some more months until we can find you a lodging, so he can have a home.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m not leaving him out on the snow, as much as people think that’s what I’d do.”

“It’s a little bit true. If it were someone else, you would. You just happen to like Buccaneer.” Zinnia said, lost for a moment in the same thoughts Olivier was just entertaining and simply hiding it better. She had no desire to think about her own future when she could help Buccaneer’s along. “And what else? What else is missing from ‘perfect’?”

“I don’t know…”

“Yes, you dooo,” Zinnia insisted.

“A… a downright miracle. And I don’t believe in those.” Olivier sighed. “I want for Northern Command to fucking send us worthy provisions. I want that list for the next expedition, but no one seems to want to join in.”

Zinnia thought about it.

“They’re scared, I think.”

“My soldiers aren’t scared of anything.”

“Everybody’s a little wary of war, don’t you think?”
“We can’t be. We’re trained not to be. And… if they are, they need to get over it. If it’s war that awaits when we try that route, then we shall meet it proudly. We’ve been waiting for it.”

Zinnia shook her head. “Not everyone needs this war like you do,” she said. “And I don’t even know why you need it.”

“Do you think I do?” Olivier held Zinnia closer, adjusting her weight on her. “I’ve been anticipating to it for almost two decades. It’s my war. There won’t ever be another one for me, I don’t care how many our country is currently fighting. Defeating Drachma is my purpose in life.”

“You already did that once, years ago. Why a second time?” Zinnia asked, philosophical.

“That wasn’t a defeat. It was postponing the inevitable. We should have been more hostile from the beginning… but—” Olivier drowned in old memories, of being a subordinate herself. She had had no voice or say back in the day, barely another dot of blue in an army of thousands who had to follow the leader until death. But death had never come, and war had, but too late, when it was already almost lost and there had been no choice but to engage. “The general at the time thought it unwise… Unwise, my ass. We wouldn’t be here armed to the teeth—and quite ineffectively, might I add—if we had sent those bastards flying back to their fucking land on the first try.”

“Yeah,” Zinnia pointed out. “And maybe only half of you would have survived. Wars are carnage.”

“And this one will be, too.” Olivier said, serious. Normally she spoke of war as a formality, but she knew better than most what one lost in wars other than one’s own life. One lost friends, companions, and faith. Olivier had never been much of a believer in anything, but she had had faith in humanity, once. Now her faith was scarce, directed only at those she had seen grow alongside with her. Now, too, she had more to lose than just companion’s lives or her own. She had Zinnia’s to protect, and she refused to admit she could ever lose it too. “I’d… I’d rethink staying here while that’s still on the horizon. I’ll just have to find something else for the captain; you can’t fight with us. I can’t let you.”

Zinnia smirked, joining her hands behind Olivier’s shoulders. “Oh, suddenly the general wants to abide by the rules?”

“No. I don’t want to bury you,” Olivier just said. “That’s all.”

“No one’s burying me.” Zinnia reassured her.

“I wouldn’t have the tools to… to avoid that. We have one doctor. If I’d managed to get my hands on alkahestry—” She groaned. “It was supposed to grant me a self-healing army that wouldn’t fall in battle. And it would have guaranteed your safety. I would be able to bring you back if you fell.” And Zinnia would fall. Now that the big news was out, anybody might hear that the notorious general up north had someone fragile to protect. She was likely to become a target. “But I failed on that as well.”

“So? All failures can be returned to later, to fix them a little. What would you need to do? I can call Candie…”

“I need what I’ve always needed,” Olivier interrupted. “A book on alkahestry, someone who knows it—a Xingese member of royalty or whoever can be considered an expert on the matter—coming here to teach me specifically.” So she could raise armies back from the dead. Her nightmares, neutralized thus.

“Okay, I don’t know shit about Xingese royalty, and you can call me out on my bullshit if I’m wrong but… wasn’t your girlfriend Xingese?”
“Yes?” Olivier didn’t see the connection. Or didn’t want to see it.

“Have you thought about talking to her? Honestly.”

She snorted again. “Of course not.”

“Why the fuck not? She might know something. And she’s probably still living where she used to, or close enough that it makes no difference.”

“Allow me to have my doubts about it…” Olivier muttered.

Zinnia put a hand to her cheek, wiping away unshed tears from her cheekbone. She had such a round face that her cheekbones passed completely unnoticed, and Zinnia loved that.

“That would be one less problem,” she said. “Maybe you’d still have terrible rations, and Buccaneer to accommodate somewhere in the border, and just tanks against Drachma’s empire… But you’d have one more skill. And I’m told you like hoarding those like a dragon with shiny coins.”

Zinnia cupped Olivier’s face now with both hands.

“So what if I do? I’m not going to focus all my research on an … ex-girlfriend.”

“Listen to me,” Zinnia got serious. “I didn’t unearth all those books and called that many people so that you now can cower in your goddamn horizontal tower while the solution to the problem may have been there in perfectly good reach the whole time.”

Olivier opened her eyes wide, put a hand to Zinnia’s.

“Wait, you called people? Didn’t you used to work at that tiny bookstore?”

“Did you really think we had books about alkahestry in the ‘tiny bookstore’?” Zinnia counterattacked.

“Never mind.”

“Just call her. She might know something we don’t.”

“And what would I say?” Olivier said. “She left me at a station, and with good reason.” Omitting details, very nice, Armstrong. Important details. “If I write to her because I need something from her, she will personally see to me never getting what I need.”

“Maybe she’ll lecture you on… whatever you did to anger her. But you might get answers. And if that can cheer you up… why not? You did send a boy south for a flower I was probably named after, wouldn’t you send a boy south for information on something that benefits your men?”

Olivier grunted. Zinnia tipped her chin up, smug.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“No, now you say it.”

Olivier grunted again. “I would,” she said. “I’d send someone south.”

Zinnia exhaled.
“Then why not write a letter? Pick up a phone? It doesn’t require a third-party.”

“I don’t have her phone number.”

She’d never needed it.

“Then write to her.”

And Olivier just nodded, burying her face in Zinnia’s neck, as she’d been dying to all evening.

Later that night, she sat alone in her office. Miles had just left to go to dinner, but she had stayed. She had told Zinnia not to save her a seat in the kitchens.

Now, Olivier stood before a collection of scratched lines on a piece of paper. She must have written a dozen versions of Dear Ianthia, and none worked for her. They all read either too personal or too impersonal, and she wanted to be neither.

She still couldn’t believe she was doing this. It had been fifteen years, she had forgotten the sorrow and the pain of having lied and having left, but Ianthia had always been one to hold a grudge. In her heart, Olivier knew this letter would only anger her again, stir old feelings back into action. And older Ianthia would be more than capable of getting on a train that took her all the way to the north only to chastise Olivier as if they were twenty again.

In the end she settled for, quite simply: Ianthia. Short and to the point, without unnecessary flourishes.

Ianthia,

I’m writing to you on behalf of the Amestrian Military.

What else? Olivier though to herself. Just make someone else write the goddamn thing, if you can’t appeal to her the way you used to.

I know it has been a long time, longer than I would admit face-to-face. I don’t do this so I get to apologize fifteen years too late or so we can get closure. Truth is, if it weren’t because of a matter of national importance, I probably would not be writing to you. I would always prefer to leave you to your life, and I believe you know this. But this is not about me any more than me leaving was.

Now I find myself requiring your services as a connoisseur of alkahestry. The outcome of the war up north may very well depend on you providing that service, and as you may know there are people here under my protection. I intend to use the power of alkahestry to reanimate my soldiers, should they fall in battle, but I’m short of an expert who can either stay under our roof to provide such a practice or teach us how it works.

Under any different circumstances I wouldn’t be writing this letter to you, but your aid to my cause might be the catalyst of a different war, and if I can prevent any casualties, I will. I always will.

That’s why I left before you could follow, to prevent yours, she thought now.
If there is any chance you might be of help, please contact me. I will procure transport to the north for you or whomever you can point me to.

Hoping you are well. She wrote it and immediately scratched it twice. No flourishes, she reminded herself. This was business, not rekindling something that had been dead for years, at least on one end of it. Ianthe had walked out of the station, hating her forever, and Olivier had gotten on her train, regretting it forever.

Olivier leaned back on her chair.

Sincerely, Olivier, she finally wrote. She had used just her first name. Maybe Ianthe would take it to mean there had never truly been any hostility there, and Olivier couldn’t know that. Yet she still didn’t add her surname. To Ianthe, her surname had been the least important piece of her. And fifteen years later Olivier was still thankful for that; back then she had needed to be stripped free of it.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god I had forgotten about the mush. One wrong choice and this story would be all mush, and I would not complain, but there's still plenty of stuff to get to aside from the cuteness, although rest assured that I will revisit the mush many, many times and I've even started outlining for a sort of alternate oneshot to Adversity that is only mush and cuteness and corny lines, so... yeah it's that bad XD.

As for the posting schedule, since there's sort of a tie in the poll, I've kind of decided I'm just going to keep on posting weekly unless a huge number of people vote for the other option or something. I hope that's cool ^^.

It feels really really weird to be posting this story in installments when it's all over now for me, like... it's almost a completely different story now that it's finished than it used to be back when I was still writing it.
“She’s not going to reply,” Olivier said as she went through her personal mail. She didn’t have much of that, and hadn’t for years, but occasionally there was a letter from her parents. Not her brother, he had had the good sense of staying away after Ishval, after seeing the fire in her eyes and deciding that recoiling was the wisest option for him.

Today she had in her hands an invitation to a ball, from her father, his calligraphy as stylistic as she remembered, all flourishes and no substance. She’d taken a quick look at it and discarded it. She hadn’t attended one of those parties her family had thrown since she’d been a teenager.

“These things take time…” Zinnia told her calmly. “Or did you expect a letter in your mailbox three days after you sent yours?”

“Firstly, we don’t have a mailbox. Secondly, it would take three days for the letter to even arrive.”

Zinnia grinned. “Good, then I don’t need to talk you out of worrying, you know how to do it yourself.”

Olivier grunted. “I’m not worrying.”

Zinnia put a hand on hers. “She’ll write back,” she said solemnly.

“What if she doesn’t?”

“At least you tried. That counts.”

“Not if it doesn’t get me what I want.”

“Then drop it. You don’t need healing powers, you have the best army on Amestris, and you’re a good leader. Even if the war is rough on you, chances are you’ll win.”

“What do you know about war?” Olivier asked, trying to be biting. She got a comparatively calmer response from Zinnia:

“What you’ve told me, bit of what I’ve heard. I’m no stranger to these things now. I’ve seen you all in action, you’re good enough.”

“She won’t write back,” Olivier said again, sighing. “She’s still angry at me.”

“I refuse to believe she’s been that angry for fifteen years. She loved you, too. After that, I doubt she’d hold a grudge for so long.”

“Oh, you don’t know her,” Olivier said. “She’s got it in her. I wouldn’t put it past her to be so angry at me she’ll tear the letter apart in her green hands…” She smiled at the memory of a girl watering plants in her garden, resting against the trunk of the magnolia tree, turning her face at Olivier and smiling gently.

For years, that was the image Olivier had conjured in her head when she’d thought of Ianthe—a happy, bright girl in her favorite place in the world, a grin on her lips. Her other memories would have been too harsh on her at a time when Briggs had already been that in its place.
She preferred to remember what had been good about it, rather than allow the wet and ugly bits to reach her now that she had no use for feeling melancholy. Ianthe wasn’t in her life anymore, letter notwithstanding, and she wasn’t trying to bring her back into it, just… to reach out, go on with her life after she’d gotten what she’d wanted.

Ianthe would, no doubt, call her names for this, too. Call her selfish and arrogant, and maybe—just maybe—Ianthe’s grudge would have faded just enough that she would help Olivier regardless.

Olivier would have, no questions asked, if instead of an invitation to a ball from her father she had received a letter from Ianthe asking for protection. Olivier might not abandoned her post to go save Ianthe, but she would have sent some men south. She would have done something.

And now she had to sit here and wait for that feeling to be reciprocated, even if it were just a little bit.

In her heart, she knew the truth, but she could also hope.

She could hope that smiling girl in the garden was still there, somewhere, ready to forgive her.

“Would you like to see a picture?” Olivier asked Zinnia tentatively. She wasn’t too sure this would be the right thing to do, considering. But Zinnia’s eyes lit up with curiosity.

“You’d never said you had pictures!”

“Just the one. I brought it here with me, after everything.”

Olivier went get it. It was in her personal drawer, underneath all the writings Zinnia had been giving her for the past few months.

It was a simple picture, without a frame, old and a little worn by time and abandon. Olivier hadn’t really looked at it since she’d been promoted, and perhaps long before that. Once she had grown comfortable in the fort, she hadn’t needed nostalgia to keep her bound to Central. She had left those lands behind and had been left to focus on her true home.

And yet she had never thrown this away.

Olivier handed the picture to Zinnia, carefully, and she took it in her hands as if this was a sacred good.

In the shot, Ianthe and Olivier had stood together. Zinnia made a noise when she saw that Ianthe was even shorter than Zinnia herself was. The two women’s hands weren’t linked together, and there was nothing else in their postures that might have suggested anything romantic, except for their eyes. They were both looking at each other, rather than at the camera, lost in each other’s gaze, even if their bodies were mostly facing forward. Zinnia wondered who had taken this photograph, and by the scenario, in the garden of a humble Central house like her own, Zinnia figured Ianthe’s parents had taken care of it.

Olivier looked so… different in this picture. Her face was prominently thinner, and she definitely had noticeable cheekbones, although her frame was considerably larger than tiny Ianthe’s. She’d looked… young as well. Zinnia couldn’t have said how exactly, but she could see hope and life in the eyes of younger Olivier’s which now took longer to coax into making an appearance.

Back then, of course, Olivier had seen no wars, even if she would have soon been sent to join one.

Zinnia looked at Olivier now, the real her, and tried to imagine how long had it been since the picture and how long after that had she been sent north. She couldn’t have been more than 19 in that picture,
sixteen years younger, sixteen years more hopeful, more alive.

“This was taken shortly after she first took me home,” Olivier muttered. “Her parents loved me.”

“No wonder why,” Zinnia said.

“I wouldn’t have expected them to,” Olivier said calmly. “I was a soldier, their daughter was a pacifist. I could have been a very bad influence for her.”

“You have kind eyes, Olivier,” Zinnia said, looking at those eyes now. “A little cold at times, a little scary. But kind, underneath it all. I’m sure they knew how to see that.”

There was a pause.

“We were happy, then,” Olivier said, more to herself than to Zinnia. “We had such different lives, but back then we hadn’t cared. We thought we could make it last forever.” She smiled sadly. “She thought I might let her come north with me, the fool…”

“The important thing,” Zinnia muttered, unable to unsee the parallels, “is that you’ve learned. You let me follow you north. You let me in.”

“I didn’t let her come because of a war. There might not be a war right now, but I won’t let you stay here when it breaks out,” Olivier said seriously now. “I can’t.”

Zinnia sighed. She didn’t feel like talking about it again. If she left, she wanted it to be her choice.

“She’ll send you a letter back,” Zinnia almost promised. “I know she will.”

Olivier exhaled slowly. She knew how wrong Zinnia was, but decided not to add wood to the fire. “I hope you are right,” she only said, and Zinnia gave her back her picture so she could put it back where it belonged.

From then on, Olivier tried not to think about the letter, travelling to Central, first on a train, then all the way through Central City’s intricate streets until it found the last loving place in the area Olivier had been at before leaving. She could still picture it perfectly, the stone house and the red and green vines climbing up its front wall, slightly covered by the magnolia tree’s branches on the side, and with those tiny stone stairs—worn and eroded—that Olivier and Ianthe had used as their private spot at night, when Ianthe’s parents had been sleeping. They had looked at the stars, then, wondering what there could be in the infinite universe and if they would ever get to know before they died.

Sometimes, during a clear night on top of the wall, Olivier would still find herself looking up at the sky and ask herself the same question, alone this time, thinking of what Ianthe might be doing across the world and if she still remembered their hushed conversations under that starry night.

Now, the thought of past times almost suffocated her more than those of the present. The present and its lack of answers. The present, her irrepressible fear of Ianthe’s wrath, fifteen years later, and Zinnia’s patronizing ‘she’ll write back’ every time they talked about it.

Olivier had a gut feeling about it. And she usually knew to trust those over what her own head was telling her to think. Deep down, her insides writhed with the knowledge that her letter had come a decade and a half too late.

After two weeks had passed, she no longer felt the oppression in her chest when thinking about getting no mail. She accepted it, quietly, as winter arrived truly to the north in fact as well as in
practice and snow covered the already-white grounds of Briggs. She had had no choice but to move forward.

Forward into more tanks, oiling the canons, and spending not half a minute a day without a man somewhere with his eyes on the border. Just as she could feel Ianthe’s silence, she could feel the tumults at the border, and the chants of war that would soon approach. Olivier had grown into a woman amidst war and conflict, she had emerged from it as who she was now, and who she was read the destinies to come from the ashes in the wind as well as her eyes would read words.

War and winter had both chosen the same month, the last month of the year, to start rising with the sun every morning, then conceal themselves during the day, and come back with a vengeance as soon as the daylight began to fade.

Olivier, tucked in bed beside a sleeping Zinnia, thought she could hear the drums in the distance, the footsteps of thousands of warriors on still-soft snow making their slow but inevitable way to Briggs.

Inexplicably, she fell asleep without fear.

War and winter were the languages she best spoke.

It was the middle of the day, the sky was blue and clear as in summer, and Zinnia and Buccaneer were caught up in the middle of a snow fight.

Olivier watched them from afar as they screamed and squealed and gasped for air. Miles had entered her office not long ago with a silly small smile on his face and had asked if she had a minute, then he had brought her to one of the open areas in the front of the wall to contemplate the scene.

She had never seen anything sillier that had the power to warm her heart this way.

“I’m going to get ya!” Zinnia was saying, zig-zagging like a deer towards Buccaneer, a snow ball in her hand. It didn’t take long before Buccaneer ducked with a chuckle and Zinnia tried to hit him anyway.

Then it was her time to run, giggling like a toddler.

“No, no, no, no, nooooo. No, don’t you dare!” She squealed again as Buccaneer stomped his snowball on her back. “I’m going to kill you, you monster. I changed into this this morning.”

She began gathering snow again as fast as she could while he did the same. This was a battle of speed, because Olivier had no doubt that they were both more than capable of hitting their targets. Zinnia, too, worked with the advantage of size, she thought. Buccaneer was much easier to hit in his humongous height and width than a girl smaller than Olivier herself.

“You know I don’t care, right?” he was saying now, finally getting up as he hauled the biggest snowball ever on his two strong arms. He’d gotten snow on his jacket. “Don’t think you’re gonna stop me by complaining.”

Zinnia looked around as if wondering where to run, then gave a high-pitched squeak, closed her eyes with a frown, and tried to cover herself with her thin arms.

Buccaneer’s chuckles echoed in the distance.
Olivier couldn’t help but laugh, too, when she was witness to Buccaneer’s gentle pouring of the ball onto Zinnia’s hair.

“That’s not fair!” she was screaming, chasing him around after that with her hands bare. She wasn’t going to make another snowball, Olivier realized, she was just laughing and running, trying to get a hold of him. “It’s so not fair, come on! Come here, let me pay you back.”

“Gotta catch me first, kid.”

Zinnia put up an accusatory finger at him.

“I’m so going to. I’m going to catch you and—and—and do what I want with you. You’ll be a burrito of snow.”

She kept chasing him in circles, but even when laughing as hard as they both were, he just was faster. Buccaneer looked like the kind of man who was all strength and no speed, but he moved with agility for both his age and his weight.

Olivier remembered seeing him dodge larger snowballs than the ones he’d thrown earlier. She remembered withstanding his hits more stoically than Zinnia was right now. *Those were such simpler times…* How Buccaneer had immediately gone after her, back in the day. She’d been the small target, shorter than him and the new face in the fort, and Buccaneer had smelled the novelty off her like a hound smells blood.

“Can’t catch me, kid,” Buccaneer was saying now.

“I will. Just—I will, god fucking damn it!”

“Watch that tongue. You’re too young and innocent to swear.”

“Innocent, my ass!”

Olivier at this point was no longer listening to them, she was lost in her own memories. It hadn’t been that long ago that she’d been someone under Buccaneer’s command, had it? Not that long since he’d tried to bury her in snow and she’d buried *him* in the record-winner biggest snowball in Briggs.

Now he was playing with the woman she loved.

Now, Olivier had been swept aside from the fun, destined to watch and care for those who still were allowed different things without them noticing.

She almost told them to come inside or at least patrol like disciplined soldiers, but she suddenly heard a voice by her side.

“Does this man never age?” asked Miles, looking at her with a mild smile, hand behind his back as he leaned to watch the two idiots in the fresh snow. It had been a while since it had snowed this beautifully, round and soft flakes that stuck to the ground without solidifying completely. Being down there right now must have been like standing on a cloud.

Olivier returned his smile and adopted his same posture.

“The answer appears to be ‘no’,” she only said.

Miles licked his lips for a moment, unsure of what to reply.

“This never gets old either.”
“As long as he’s here, it won’t.”

“That’s not much longer,” he had the terrible sense to say, and he seemed to realize it a pause after. “I’m sorry, I—have you found anything yet?”

To his surprise, she smiled again. It was a somewhat sad smile, though, but he didn’t comment on it. A smile from her always was reason for celebration.

“Actually,” Olivier said, eyes on the battle still ongoing down on the snow, “I’ve just signed the papers to acquire a little cottage a few miles west of here. It’s been abandoned for too long, and the owner was prepared to sell for far less than I’d expected.”

It had also come to a surprise for her when she’d found old documentation about the area. A cottage that size and that close to the border should have been property of Briggs long ago, if only for protective measures against any possible Drachman incursion on Amestrian soil. She had immediately rectified that by buying it as soon as she’d been able to, without Buccaneer’s permission, of course.

She figured she might as well give him no choice, just present him with everything once it was all already set so he couldn’t say no. Olivier wouldn’t have him living on the streets, not in this weather.

Miles made a noncommittal noise.

“You hadn’t mentioned anything.”

“I preferred not to trouble you with this,” she said with a sigh. Then, she looked up at him. “How far along are you with your task?”

“Well enough,” Miles said. “The list is suitably long now. I just left it on your desk.”

“Thank you,” she said.

And they both continued to watch the two idiots throw snow at each other as if they were children who had known each other a long time. In a way, they had.

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You could feel the ambiance hours before. The patrols had been pushed back a couple of hours so everyone could enjoy a longer dinner together that night, and the best meat for the week had been saved for the occasion. They would be eating scraps for the remainder of the month, but it mattered little when they had two more free hours to dine and a whole night to party. The only night a year they were allowed to do so, their only vacation in a life filled with work and duty.

Because the year was soon ending and a celebration was due.

And celebrate, they did. Slamming their hands on the table, the soldiers made rudimentary music for the lyrics they were singing at the top of their lungs as their public, an awe-struck Zinnia and a frowning Olivier, laughed from time to time at the ridiculousness of it all.

A song ended and another started a few seconds later, when a voice rose to affirm itself over all the other humming in the kitchens. This time, it was Buccaneer’s that stood out in its loudness, singing a song Olivier hadn’t heard in years. He had brought out the old repertoires again.

_For a long time we’ve been_
Marching off to battle
In our thundering herd
We feel a lot like cattle
Like the pounding beat
Our aching feet aren't
Easy to ignore

He stopped for a second or two to allow someone else to pick up after him, and they did gladly, singing the chorus whole-heartedly.

Hey, think of instead
A girl worth fighting for
That's what I said
A girl worth fighting for

Miles cheered as that stanza ended and Buccaneer looked about ready to keep on taking all the attention and sing whatever came next. Zinnia, too, clapped to the rhythm as Olivier judged silently, halfway between wishing she could sport this kind of behavior without feeling like an idiot.

I want her paler than the
Moon with eyes that
Shine like stars
My girl will marvel at
My strength, adore my
Battle scars

Buccaneer put his whole soul into the song, and his friends could all hear the longing in his voice that he’d fabricated to create a story that seemed so real it could grab at the hems of their shirts. He hadn’t been in love in too long, long before Briggs, and any old feelings he may have had had faded years and years ago, and he only ever recalled it during times like this.

Before silence could take over, Miles cleared his throat and lifted his voice to continue singing after Buccaneer.

You were quite the charmer
And I'll bet the ladies love
A man in armor

He elbowed Buccaneer after he’d finished, when everyone picked up the pace even louder than before:

You can guess what we
Have missed the most
Since we went off to war
What do we want?

A girl worth fighting for

This time Zinnia herself stood up, laughing like an idiot, and made up some words to fit into the overall song. It was silly and maybe not very inappropriate, but she deserved some silliness from time to time and god only knew she almost never had time for it.

How 'bout a girl who's got a sword…

She started, and suddenly her eyes opened wide and she blushed intensely.

Wait, no, that can’t be in the song?

Then they all laughed, too, because it was indeed silly and small but a perfect representation of her life right now, the life they’d all had access to for a little while now. They all began singing again, Buccaneer and Miles and Zinnia, and even Olivier. She joined them all as soon as they’d started, almost as if it were an hymn for this time of year. She never sang, but once wouldn’t hurt.

What do we want?

A girl worth fighting for

Wish that I had

A girl worth fighting for

A girl worth fighting… for

Olivier then turned to Zinnia, smirking: “A girl with a sword, huh?”

“My head was all blank, that was all I could think of.”

“I have a sword, all right,” Olivier said, touching the hilt of her sword to make a point.

“Oh, you thought I was singing about somebody else? I don’t know about you, but I know one girl with a sword, and that’s you, sir.”

“I figured, wonder why.”

They laughed and booped their noises together. Zinnia leaned her had against Olivier’s shoulder.

“The sword’s more elegant than an axe,” she said. “But I can definitely see you with an axe instead.”

“If only you’d seen me with a bazooka…”

“Shit…” Zinnia knew better than anyone how hard and fast she’d melt from the heat if she ever saw Olivier wielding such a weapon in her presence.

Olivier held her closer with one hand and poured her more hot broth with the other while the men continued to sing echoes of the song. Today the tables had all been put together in celebration and the food was served on the tables, not the counter as it was usual.
“Or in the tank. I’m sure you’d... like the tank.”

“Uh-huh.” And Zinnia was a goner already. She was really grateful she had never seen the tank in person because just imagining Olivier driving it would have been enough to send her round the bend. To make up for it, she said: “Do you think you can stomach a kiss in public, fearless ice queen?”

“I don’t see why not,” Olivier said. “They’re all fairly preoccupied with more singing.”

Zinnia unglued herself from Olivier a little to see what they were singing. She didn’t recognize this song either, but she could definitely relate to the feeling of being in love some of them were echoing, this time in a more crude and credible manner than Buccaneer’s dramatic take on it.

When she thought about it, these men worked 24/7 at Briggs, hardly ever leaving for missions. Some of them had families, wives, husbands, even children. They must have missed them around this time of the winter, when it was colder outside and almost the end of the year.

“If someone says anything, I’ll kill them…” Olivier promised right before going in for that kiss.

“I doubt it.”

And then they locked lips at last, and the men finished singing and started hooting, but when Olivier cracked an eye open she realized it was not at them but at the song that was over.

After that there came way more upbeat songs adorned by beer and chanting, noise and loudness, and men being happy together, even if they were far away from home. To some, home was this. Precisely this.

And they weren’t going to waste a second of it, when soon enough some would have to go out there again, to the bitter cold, to spy on Drachma in the distance once again.

It didn’t matter to them now. They knew to worry later when the party was over.

Olivier decided to do the same thing.

When the men began singing something slow and almost danceable, she stood up, offered Zinnia a hand and became young again, daring and bold, ready to do everything and care so little about how it turned out. Zinnia started giggling, so nervous, but Olivier just put her arms around her waist and soon Zinnia’s wrapped around her shoulders, and before any of them could notice, they were dancing slow to the gravely tones of the new song.

“A girl worth fighting for, huh?” Zinnia said in low voice.

“It was part of the song.”

“So you don’t really need one?”

“It’s easier to focus on your fight if someone you love isn’t in danger of succumbing to your defeat,” Olivier said. “So, yes, I can do without a girl to fight for.”

“A girl can also fight for herself.”

“Now, don’t get cocky. You have a lot to improve, muscles to build…”

“Not everyone can be as strong as you, Armstrong. Let the rest of us be mediocre.”

“In war? Quit dreaming.”
They danced in silence for a while longer.

“This is nice, isn’t it?” Zinnia said with a huge smile on her face, looking at the room at large. “All of us, here, just enjoying the moment. And look at you, you’re dancing.”

“Once a year won’t kill me.”

“You should do this more,” Zinnia said, licking her lips. “Get out of you shell, I mean. Looks good on you.”

And it was true. Olivier’s face had shed its usual layers of worry and grumpiness. Tonight, she looked radiant, and not just looked it but felt it. There was something about being surrounded by her people, doing nothing but live, and celebrating.

She had never thought herself a person who was good at celebrations. Back in the day, she had mostly spent the balls at home drinking somewhere when people weren’t paying attention and looking at the rich women who walked back and forth in her living room, admiring the furniture, without even noticing her.

Even when she’d arrived north she hadn’t been a party person, preferring always to hide in the quietness of the library from the noisy men all around. But now she was neither that young filly her parents had wanted and failed to tame nor a new soldier in the fort. Now, she had made a name for herself and a reputation she could afford to blur a little on nights like these.

“Thank you,” Olivier said simply. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

“The year is ending soon,” Zinnia said, sighing. “These moments, right before the end, are always so bittersweet, aren’t they? So full of regret and what ifs. I like that ours is like this, with handmade music and the humblest of companies. There’s no room for any of the dark stuff. I like that.”

“Write that down,” Olivier said with a smile. “Those are wise and beautiful words.”

“You’d keep them if I did,” Zinnia replied, twirling in her arms when Olivier gave her the cue to. “Pick them up when you needed to and otherwise forget about them. I want you to remember them, not turn to them.”

“Then…” Olivier said, leaning close to Zinnia’s neck, not giving half a shit about company and what not. Those men would suck it, whether they decided to look or not. This wasn’t any of their business. “Why write me so many paragraphs praising my talents, my beauty, my voice…? Did you not want me to remember those?”

Zinnia arched her neck and closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath.

“I harbored hopes of telling you directly one day,” she mumbled. “Still kind of do. And I will, if I’m ever brave enough.”

Olivier planted a soft last kiss on the base of Zinnia’s neck and then rose again to look her in the eyes.

“You don’t have to tell me. I already know.”

“Still,” Zinnia said. “One day I want to.”

And then the song and the mood of it all changed. They were singing something else now and Buccaneer had climbed atop the table with a jar of beer.
Olivier gave out a hearted chuckle and grabbed herself a jar as well.

“Want something?"

Zinnia shook her head.

They both sat back down on the bench, Zinnia on Olivier’s lap, and watched Buccaneer sing:

_Do what you want ’cause a pirate is free,
You are a pirate!
Yar - Har - fiddle - dee-dee
being a pirate is all right with me!
do what you want ’cause a pirate is free
you are a pirate!

_Hours later, almost at dawn, when the last shift was finishing dinner, still echoing verses of all the songs that had stuck to their hearts, Zinnia was struggling to lift Olivier from the bench and take her upstairs.

“I’m fine…” Olivier complained in a mutter very improper of her.

“No, you’re not,” Zinnia replied, finally managing to get her to her feet and start walking supported on her.

When they were out of earshot, Zinnia allowed herself a brief remark:

“This is why I don’t drink, eh, Oli?”

“Oli?” Olivier chuckled at the nickname.

“I’m Flower Girl, you’re going to be Oli. Drunk Oli.”

“My mother would kill you if she heard.” There was a giggle this time. When normal drunk, Olivier got even grumpier than normal and frowned almost constantly, but if she passed the limit she got very very drunk, giggly and cute—someone completely different than the woman Zinnia was used to.

“Your mother isn’t here,” Zinnia said, quickly turning to one soldier with rosy cheeks to say goodnight to him.

Olivier was silent for the two seconds it took Zinnia to call for the elevator. Then she looked at her as if she were the full moon, one of those entrancing mysteries man had always been drawn to.

“You’re so beautiful…”

Zinnia smiled and adjusted Olivier’s arm on her shoulder, trying to haul her up when they got in the elevator now.

“You’re too drunk to perceive beauty as it truly is.”

“However drunk I may be—” Olivier hiccups. “Even so I’m excellent at perceiving beauty. Yours
kills me. D’you know that? Every time I look at you I—” She looked at Zinnia now. “Fuck. Fuck, Zinnia. I’m excellent at finding beauty, but terrible at processing it once it’s in front of me. I don’t deserve to have it in front of me.”

“It’s usually on top of you,” Zinnia said jokingly. The elevator’s doors opened a few seconds after. “Come on, we’re almost there.”

Olivier mumbled something incoherently as Zinnia made an effort to open the door with some dignity and get the two of them inside the room.

“Home, sweet home,” Zinnia said, slowly guiding Olivier towards the bed. She sat down, groaning, and Zinnia started undoing her buttons with the care of a mother, then took off her boots. “You sleep like this most nights, I guess one more won’t hurt.”

“No,” Olivier said, and her eyes were like fire right before she lunged right in to kiss Zinnia on the mouth. She was a fierce hurricane, drunk on many more things than just beer. Her breath was chaotic as well, but not enough to tick Zinnia off. She kissed her back gently, and just as gently pushed her away when Olivier’s hand started toying with the hem of her pants.

“Not tonight, general,” Zinnia said, taking off her own boots and jacket and changing into her sleepwear. Olivier watched, jaw dropped, from the edge of the bed. “Drunk as you are, it’s like making out with a wall.”

“I’m an excellent drunk. I mean, kisser. Drunk kisser, yes.” Another giggle.

Zinnia laughed softly as well.

“Get in,” she said. “I’ll cuddle you a little. If you promise not to yell at me tomorrow when you wake up with your head throbbing.”

“Headaches don’t make me yell,” Olivier pouted.

“Everything makes you yell, honey.” Zinnia said, wrapping an arm around her and closing her eyes, then slamming a hand on the switch to kill the lights. It was the first time she had ever called her ‘honey’ or anything similar. They usually didn’t go for the corny approach. “Happy holidays….”

She was almost drifting off to sleep when she heard Olivier’s slightly, very slightly more sobered up voice say:

“I love you…”

“Love you, too.”

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A lightning storm must have made its way into her head, and the constant lightning crashing against the walls of the her brain was what woke her, way before the light coming in from the window did, long before the alarm clock did.

She didn’t even sit up on the bed.

The real storm hadn’t gone anywhere. And neither had the list of things she needed to do today, if her pounding head didn’t stop her. It shouldn’t, neither broken bones nor the flu had been able to ever stop her on her tracks before.
Olivier groaned, holding her head in her hands. What the hell had happened that had rendered her so beat-up? What on earth had she done? She barely remembered last night as a night filled with song and booze, most of which she’d swallowed eagerly in an attempt to drown out her inability to enjoy the spirit of the ‘holidays’. They didn’t actually celebrate anything nor have days off in the fort, but being a week away from the end of another year always made people become the most festive version of themselves. Including her, apparently.

She hadn’t gotten that drunk in a long, long time.

So drunk her memories stopped at a slow dance and the murmur of louder and louder songs in the background after a while. She would have to ask around when she felt like a human being again. Right now, despite what she knew she should be on her feet to do, she closed her eyes, ignoring the hammering in her head and stomach, and tried to fall back asleep.

Her chest rose slowly as she tried to slow down her breathing, frown ever-present in her face. There was something wrong with her. A terrible wave of pain went right through her, and she opened her eyes wide, clutching the side of the mattress with one hand and leaning in to set loose the last few jars of beer she had downed not that long ago.

Looking at the mess, she panted and she didn’t feel any better.

“What’s happening?” Zinnia’s muffled voice asked. “Is it morning already?”

Olivier dropped herself back on the mattress.

“Yeah…” she said, her voice raspy from the effort and the exhaustion going right through her. She must have really drunk her fill last night, oh yes. What had she been thinking? “It’s morning.”

How early it was, that she didn’t know.

Zinnia sighed and rolled over, refusing to get up just now. Then she saw.

“Oh fuck…”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“I’m going to call the doctor, okay? Stay here.”

“Where would I go, huh?” Olivier said feebly.

“Knowing you,” Zinnia said, getting out of bed trying to avoid the big pool of liquid by the mattress, “to work.”

She got down as quickly as she could to the lower levels and fetched a sleeping doctor from his cot by the lab and brought him upstairs again as discreetly as possible. This wasn’t the kind of thing a doctor was needed for, but maybe Olivier could use a reprimand and a reminder that she wasn’t twenty anymore.

Zinnia also grabbed a few cleaning materials from one of the closets nearby and as the doctor examined a hung-over general she cleaned everything as best she could.

“Not much I can tell you,” the doctor was saying. “You know what you need to do: plenty of water and rest.”

Olivier scoffed.
“And a well-deserved warning to be careful with the drinking in future occasions. Nothing you don’t know, we’re all adults here.”

She thanked him anyway, despite clearly not liking his presence in her room, and as soon as he was gone she got up from the bed as Zinnia threw literal feet of wet paper into the bin.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, and where are you going?” Zinnia said.

“I’ve a batch of men to send into your new route this morning.”

“You’ve also got to drink water and stay in bed, you’re sick.”

Olivier made a face.

“Okay, fine, you’re hungover. Same principles apply, you can’t show yourself like this. You’ll depress the men.”

Olivier tried to push past Zinnia, but she had to grab her shoulder all of a sudden not to fall when her stomach starting swirling again, no matter if it was empty this time. Zinnia, terrified out of her wits, grabbed Olivier’s wrist as if that could help.

“You’re not going anywhere like this,” she said, and her tone marked just how final that was. “I’ll get down if you want me to see them off, but you’re staying here.”

“Yes, mum…” Olivier said, sitting down again, rubbing both of her temples now that she didn’t need to cling to any steady support to stay upright.

“Don’t insult your mother like that,” Zinnia said. Then she changed into her uniform and tried to smile before she left. “I’ll be back right away. Want me to tell them anything?”

“Just that they should be careful.”

Zinnia did smile now. There went Olivier, feigning not to care and caring with an intensity that could blind.

“I will.”

The forty men had left shortly after Zinnia had come down from her bedroom, bundled up for the cold, even though the day had dawned especially clear once again and there was close to no wind. Buccaneer had led them, proud and stoic, back into his element. Zinnia had waved at them as they’d left, in Olivier’s stead, and… for herself, too. These were her people now, and they were going out there to do something Zinnia had helped create, a project as hers as it was Buccaneer’s.

She should have been out there with them, seeing the border up close, every cave and every worn path and every star in the sky. But she understood she had little to no training to do so. If Drachma showed up when she was out there, she wouldn't have known what to do. She would have run, but Briggs men didn’t run.

She stayed by the open gate with a bunch of other soldiers, watching the tiny silhouettes of two batches of Mountain Men disappear into the horizon, until there was only snow to see. Then, the gate had been closed and everyone had gone back to their tasks.

Zinnia had returned upstairs to a woman who fidgeted more in bed than on that uncomfortable chair
in her office. She hated standing still more than anyone else, it made Zinnia smile when she walked in the room again and saw Olivier fighting the covers.

“How did it go?” she asked, ceasing to struggle as if pretending she’d been this quiet all along.

“They left, not in much better shape than you are,” Zinnia said, tipping Olivier’s chin affectionately. “But they’re fine, don’t worry about them. You’ve herded them well.”

“And now they’re sheep?” Olivier muttered, closing her eyes as she took a deep breath and tried to, finally, find the proper posture in the bed. Perhaps now that she was not alone it would be easier.

“More like you’re a shepherd…”

Olivier groaned, and Zinnia’s soul wrinkled in response. This was the first time she was seeing the general go through anything more serious than a work-induced headache, and she had no clue how to deal with it. She had a thirty-five year old woman in a bed at nine in the morning who normally was the first one to leave the room, a woman who in normal circumstances fought every single affliction until she could crush it in her arms.

Gently, Zinnia sat on the bed, trying not to make the motion too sudden and bother Olivier’s fragile head right now.

“Still in pain, aren’t you?” she said, reaching out to hold Olivier’s left hand.

“Last night was a bad idea,” Olivier muttered. “I’m banning it next year.”

“You need to not drink next year…” Zinnia mumbled under her breath.

If Olivier heard it, Zinnia had no idea, because the subject was dodged completely.

“Get in with me…” Olivier pleaded.

“I need to get ready for work,” Zinnia said … while pushing the covers back to get in. She couldn’t resist the tiny tug at her sleeve that pulled her in, she followed it like a red line of fate.

“I see, yeah…”

But Zinnia glared stiffly at her and she shut up immediately.

“You don’t need to drink to have fun,” Zinnia said. In her world, drinks were very occasional and never a coping mechanism. They were taken in celebration or sorrow, but in moderation, and never alone. Olivier, although she’d been drinking during a celebration and surrounded by friends, had still drunk as if she was alone. And it had been a long time since she had been.

And, of course, to her the circumstances were different.

“That’s kind of the point of drinking, Zinnia. Without that, I’m still me.”

And the echo of that took a few seconds to sink in completely. Does she mean that without booze she’s someone no one can love? When she was one of the best loved people in the fort, one of the most respected ones, and above all… the one they all looked to. The role she played was the role they all lived by.

“Well,” Zinnia said, “Some of us like you. And I like you better when you’re not… like this.”

“I’ll be fine by tonight.”
Zinnia giggled. That much, at least, was true. Give her a few hours and the sickness would have passed and she could go back to barking orders and being grumpy.

“You’ll never be fine, Armstrong.”

Chapter End Notes

References used this time: You’re a pirate, from Lazytown & Mulan’s famous A Girl Worth Fighting For. There’s a whole section of my Adversity playlist that’s just Briggs songs and that one is definitely one of them. I always had this headcanon that every straight man on Briggs gets together sometimes to sing that song.

On a separate issue, sometimes I get really sad that I didn't post the chapters as soon as I finished them, because now I realize how cool it would have been to read about December while being in December, but oh well... Just know that it was an amazing experience for me to be writing about the same times of the year I was living, a part of my soul has been inevitably embedded on this story.

And, in case anyone's curious, I made a little edit of the magnolia pic of Ianthe and Olivier.
There were three knocks on their door, and after a few seconds without an answer, the door opened and the light was turned on. It woke Olivier immediately, the same way the first sun rays of dawn did, only this time it was artificial light that hit her eyes to reveal a soldier standing in the entrance to the room.

“General, sir,” the soldier said. “The Flower Route men are back.”

“Already?” Olivier said, rubbing her eyes. She hadn’t registered it yet, what it meant for them to be back so soon. When she did, her hand tightened on the mattress and she gripped it as though it were a piece of wood to destroy in order to prove her strength. “What happened? Is the captain alive?”

Buccaneer… The first image that had popped into her head after that ‘already’ had been blood. Dark oozing blood slipping out of Buccaneer’s right shoulder socket as he stood in the snow, a puff of breath leaving his mouth. He had kept walking back in the cold, missing an arm and having only stopped the bleeding to a certain extent.

_Not again,_ she thought. _Please, not again._

No one had died under her rule, but people had lost limbs. And she remembered, clear as day, the lives the war had zealously taken away. At least the only thing it had ever taken from Buccaneer had been his arm… until now, when it might have taken something else. Something precious to all of them.

The soldier hurried to assure her nothing of the sort had happened.

“He’s okay, sir,” he said. “They’re all safe. But you need to come down at once.”

Zinnia chose that moment to open her eyes as well, moaning in complaint because of the early hour.

“What’s going on? What time is it?” she muttered, yawning as she sat up and stretched her arms upwards.

“Around 4 am”.

“Soldier,” Olivier said, “wait for me outside.” She slithered out of bed as if her entire body hurt to move and shooed the soldier away so she could get dressed. She stood at the drawer and dragged out the first thing she saw. She wasn’t sure it was even proper attire for this meeting, but she didn’t care. She was already late for it.

Shortly after, Zinnia tried to follow, tripping over her own boots by the bed because she couldn’t keep her eyes open. Olivier stared at her for a moment. She looked like a child that has been asked to stay awake past their bedtime without having been explained why.

“Where do you think you’re going, flower girl?”

“Coming down with you,” Zinnia said, as if it were obvious.

She, too, got one of her comfortable dresses out of the drawer.
“This is an official matter,” Olivier said gently. She didn’t know how she was channeling the necessary energy to be soft. Deep down, she had a giant warning alert pulsing along with her heart, and knowing it would never go away until the war was over only made it pulse harder. She swallowed bile. “I’ll handle it. You need sleep”

“If something’s happened, I want to be there.” For you, Zinnia thought but didn’t add out loud. Getting news at this hour couldn’t mean anything good, and whatever it was Zinnia was scared for Olivier.

“Please. I'll wake you when I’m back, but please… don’t argue now.”

The word ‘please’ struck Zinnia in the chest like a blow from a hammer and she was rendered speechless. Something truly terrible must be happening for Olivier to want to do it alone, to keep her feelings to herself, and protect Zinnia from a truth she’d end up finding out about anyway.

But if Olivier wanted to go alone, what could she do? She wasn’t a fixed part of this place as much as she’d been made to believe she could be. At the end of the day, she was still a visitor who would one day leave, sooner or later. And visitors didn’t get involved in official military matters. That was the rule.

“Fine…” Zinnia muttered at last, dropping the dress back inside the drawer and going to sit on the bed again. She desperately craved to get back in and close her eyes, but it could still wait a couple of minutes. “Be careful”

“It’s okay, there’s nothing to be careful about.” Olivier said, not believing it. “It’s all going to be okay…”

And yet those words betrayed the meaning she’d hoped to attach to them.

“I hope so,” Zinnia replied.

Olivier leaned in to kiss Zinnia’s forehead.

“Don’t wait up.”

As soon as she left, something snapped shut inside her. She had to cage her feelings or they would escape and this would turn into an emotional battlefield sooner than it had to be a real one.

The fact that all of her men were safe and sound was the only thing that comforted her on the way down to the lower levels of the fort. If anything had happened to any of them... she didn’t think she could forgive herself. Sending those batches into the wild had been her idea, to prevent unwanted advances, and whatever happened during would always be her responsibility.

Her heart pounded against her sternum when she spotted them a fair distance from the stairs she was just finished descending. Twenty men huddled up, still in their snow uniforms, waiting for her.

Safe and sound, but at what cost?

When she came closer, she saw it in their faces, the effort of walking non-stop for miles in the terrible mountain weather to bring back the news. Whatever news they had brought with them.

“General,” Buccaneer saluted her.

He looked like shit, and that was only the best of several stages of shittiness in each and every of their faces, as if they’d collectively battled a giant beast in the snow. She felt a surge of tears swell up
in her throat and cleared them away. She couldn’t cry in front of them.

“What happened?” Olivier just asked.

“They’re arming the border,” Buccaneer told her, his cheerfulness all gone from both his face and his voice. For the first time in a long time, she witnessed the damage all those six decades had left on his skin and demeanor, and she missed the Buccaneer in jest they had all come to love. “There’s men patrolling, holding long-range weapons. And a safe house. We’ve seen them mimic our uniforms for the snow, too. It’s not confirmed yet but it looks as if they planned to set an incursion on our territory soon. It’s not the first time they pool at the border, but it also doesn’t look like it’ll be the last if we don’t stop them.”

“How many?” Olivier asked, raising her eyebrow. One of the reasons why these twenty men had returned from their inaugural mission had to be because of the numbers. Otherwise, they would have fought, or stayed there longer to amass some more information to bring her, although for the short amount of time they’d spied on Drachma they had brought plenty of intelligence on them.

Buccaneer didn’t look too confident about the question and its answer.

“We believe around five hundred.”

“FIVE HUNDRED???”

“We couldn’t come close, sir,” another one said, next to Buccaneer, trembling a little from the cold. “They might have spotted us on their side of the border. It would have been carnage.”

Maybe it should have been, maybe the war should have started now.

“There has never been that many Drachman in the border since the last war. This is a declaration of intentions,” Olivier said. “And an advantage to us, if we can figure out something more precise than them wanting an incursion.”

“What’s the course of action to follow, then, sir?” Buccaneer said.

“Get some rest. It must have been a difficult journey back. Tomorrow I’ll group more men, we’ll go pay Drachma a little visit.”

“But…” someone else commented. A young soldier, his youth apparent in his face and words. Olivier’s heart hurt just by thinking she was sending boys to what could very soon turn into a war. “With all due respect, sir, we’re outnumbered.”

Olivier nodded solemnly. “We’re also better equipped. Three hundred of us can take five hundred of them. And we have a fort to survive a siege in, they don’t.”

“Not in open battle, we won’t be better equipped,” Buccaneer said. “Out there it’s a few of us against an army of them.”

“The point is stopping that army before it moves in on the fort. Or at least spy on them long enough to know what’s coming and when. Now that they’re here we can’t ignore their presence, we need to get ready.” Her stomach sank to the deepest pits of her. War was here, at long last, then why did she not feel excited about it? She’d been craving the culmination of peace for years, the final touch of war to crown her career.

Now she had more to lose. She had plenty to lose in battle, and plenty to leave behind. And the thought of that terrified her. But she was still major general, and she still had an army to commandeer
out into the depths of the snow to meet their enemy. Whenever, wherever, she could and didn’t want to say no. But she still felt the need to turn her head back and look at what was at stake.

“Wake Miles,” Olivier ordered. “And do get some rest.”

Only one man got up to fetch Miles. The rest stayed, stubborn.

“Didn’t you hear me?”

“We’re not staying behind. We’re the only ones who know where the Drachman are located.”

She decided not to reply saying that she could follow a map to them.

“No, you’re not staying behind.” She agreed that much was true, at least. “But I can’t allow you to go back there without getting any sleep first. It will be a long walk until we reach them.”

“Still”, someone said, “we’d rather wait here.”

She kept asking them questions about the location and any detail that might have slipped their minds until Miles showed up, tired to an extreme that wasn’t human, with his material and ready to work.

“General,” he said.

“We’ve a situation with Drachma,” Olivier said, glaring at the other soldiers so they would leave them alone. “I need you to draft me a list of a hundred men to take to the mountains, not counting these twenty. And to prepare the schedule for the next week for the remainder almost two hundred. Can you do that?”

He looked at her, confused for a second. “Yes, sir.”

“Thank you.” she told them, then finally turned to address the others. “The rest of you, I order you to go to your bunks and try to get some sleep. We’ll leave after dawn.”

“We?” Buccaneer asked.

“If it comes to battle, Drachma won’t be expecting me to lead you outside the fort.”

“The fort needs you as well, sir.”

“The fort will be well-defended, fear not. None of you need me either. I’m going because I need to be present to know what we’re facing. Now go.”

With a collective sigh, they started leaving in tiny group for the elevator until, finally, Miles and Olivier were left alone to work against the clock to make this possible.

They headed for the kitchen and their benches, sitting at one and spreading all of Miles’ materials on the table so they could both be aware of what the numbers were and could be.

“You should stay, Olivier,” he dared to say as they went over possible candidates for the next day’s trip. “You’re the heart of Briggs.”

“Hearts have two halves.”

Miles deliberately put a hand to the paper she was reading to make her look up at him. His eyes were baggy and his expression hunched and worn, but she didn’t look any better. She looked like a war ghost, and perhaps she had been in a way since the first conflict against the Drachman, and they had
all been too blinded by her resolve and her anger to notice how translucent she’d become as of late.

“You can’t sever yourself in half to be with both groups,” Miles said softly, looking into her blue eyes.

She didn’t grace him with an answer. Of course she couldn’t be in two places at once, no matter how much she might want to. But things being what they were, if she could just see Drachma in action for a minute, they might eventually be able to use whatever information she’d inferred from it to come out on top. And yet her heart would remain on the fort, hidden beneath blankets and curtains and cushions. Her heart, and he knew, would definitely be torn in two—one half with the men at the mountain, the physical half; one half back in her home with who she loved.

“And what about Zinnia?” he asked again.

“What about her?”

“She’ll be staying behind.” It wasn’t a question. “She’ll be safe here.”

“Until war breaks out,” Miles said.

“Until war breaks out,” Olivier confirmed. “But we will already be back for that, and I will have sent her away by then.”

Miles sobered but said nothing. A civilian in the midst of war was not a good thing, not at all.

They worked in silence until right before dawn, pushing past their own limits to stay awake. In the end, they managed to list enough people to march right this morning, if they could get them all to wake up early. They had chosen as wisely as they’d been able to, taking into account current shifts and permanence in the fort. Olivier still wasn’t going to send children of Central to fight the battles that Briggs men had for years. Not only because it wasn’t fair to those that carried war in their hearts but because she feared the north would finish their lives before they were aware of what they’d gotten into.

Miles had been appointed to go as well. Olivier trusted him more than anyone else in the fort. He was diligent and quiet, working out of tenacity and duty, and she would need that if things got rough out there. She felt sorry for him, because he hadn’t slept much that night, but she’d be sure to not let him take first watch later today when they were in the snow.

She gave the list of men to the first soldier who entered the kitchen for an early breakfast and ordered him to wake up and gather up everyone on it. She couldn’t do that, she had something else to do.

Quick as she could, given that she had been awake since four am, Olivier went up the stairs to her bedroom. She didn’t know if Zinnia was up already, or if she’d slept at all. If she knew something, it was that Zinnia could be just as stubborn as she was.

To her surprise, Olivier found her hugging a pillow, all huddled up under the blankets, fast asleep—a different posture than usual, clearly noticing the empty space in the bed. It broke Olivier’s heart to wake her, but she had made her a promise, and she intended to stay true to it.

Softly, Olivier shook her awake.

When she opened her eyes, Olivier forced her tears back inside. She hadn’t cried downstairs and she sure as hell was not crying now. She wouldn’t know how. She wanted to, though, when she saw in Zinnia’s gaze that the girl had tried to stay up and wait but had succumbed to sleep.
“Zinnia…” she said, almost telling her off.

But Zinnia blinked, sleepy like a princess in a fairytale right after her prince has kissed her awake, and Olivier couldn’t say anything.

“You’re … back,” Zinnia murmured, astonished.

“I…” Olivier said, unable to look her in the eye any longer, not while she said these words because she knew how much they would disappoint Zinnia: “I need to leave again.”

“What?” Zinnia tried to wake up completely, but her head was still cloudy with sleep.

“The men have found an army of Drachman at the border,” Olivier told her softly. “We’re going out there to investigate it.”

“But it’s dangerous.”

“Life is danger, kid,” Olivier said. “And protecting this fort from it is my job.”

“You’re leaving now?”

Olivier nodded, still looking down.

“An hour or so from now,” she replied.

“You haven’t slept…”

“There’s no time for that now. I need to go.”

She got up from the floor where she had kneelt, but Zinnia grabbed her hand and pierced her eyes with hers. Olivier was frozen in place. She couldn’t escape her eyes, and she’d known before going in.

“Don’t go. What if something happens to you?”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” Olivier said softly. “I’m the Northern Wall of Briggs…”

For some reason, right now it hadn’t sounded as fierce and convincing as it usually did. What did it matter to Zinnia if she was in love with a woman they called a wall? She was still just another human, victim to time and cruelty just as everybody else.

“You’re also a woman made of flesh and bone. You can be killed, you’re not made of ice and steel. You’re not a wall,” Zinnia said, her anger true yet soft like a child’s in comparison to an adult’s.

“Just…” Olivier said, unsure of how to word this credibly, as she cupped Zinnia’s face in her hand. She passed her thumb distractedly over Zinnia’s cheekbones. “Keep an eye on the horizon for me, will you? I won’t be gone for long. Give me five days and you will see me emerging from the horizon, walking back home to you.”

“To me…” Zinnia repeated in a mutter.

“Five days,” Olivier promised. “And I will be back here. Count on it.”

Zinnia wanted to say that Olivier would be missing out on the end of the year, on everything they had planned to do among their family of soldiers, but she bit her lip and didn’t bring it up. She was too tired to think properly. She just knew her love was leaving her, and perhaps never to return.
Even in this state Zinnia knew Olivier was walking into a war she might not be able to walk out of any time soon.

“Five days,” she only said. “You promised me five days. Remember that.”

“I promised.”

Then Olivier leaned towards her a little, her lips full of more promises she wanted to keep but didn’t know if she’d be able to.

*One half of me stays here with you,* she thought. But she could never voice that. Zinnia wouldn’t be living it as true, Zinnia would be alone again in a place that had never truly become her own, missing her. And Olivier couldn’t do that to her. Not like this, not now.

Slowly, she neared closer and closer to Zinnia’s mouth.

So little, thin-lipped, and yet it held the universe.

Olivier reached out to take it and kissed her, because she could never say goodbye, she could never mean it, she could never get past the fear of never being back.

She knew she might never be back.

But she couldn’t let that show.

If it did, Zinnia said nothing. If she shared this fear with Olivier, Zinnia swallowed it and, as per usual, just gave Olivier the universe through that kiss.

“Don’t miss me,” Olivier said, once they’d separated a little. The sun was up, she had to go.

“I’ll try.”

Zinnia smiled, despite how much it cost her to. Olivier hadn’t slept and was going out there exhausted and, to some extent, scared, and that was a terrible combination when facing the enemy. Zinnia smiled because she wanted Olivier to at least have some motivation, some love to cling to if things got tough.

*When you go, one half of me goes with you.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the chapter being on the short side, but I think that the general mood of it makes up for the lack of more words ^^ This is actually one of my favorite chapters, maybe because of the title.

I hope you're having a nice week :3
The cold had greeted her like an old friend she hadn’t visited in too long. When had it been the last time since she’d gone outside? She had awaited this moment for longer than she could even recall, and yet the cold’s welcome didn’t sit well in her heart. Something was wrong, the timing was wrong, it was too soon. This wasn’t supposed to happen yet. She’d always known war was coming, she’d always waited for it, but not now. Now, it was not a good time for her.

And yet she kept marching forward, feet crushing the snow in her path, a long line of men following her into the mountains. She couldn’t have said why, but soon her pace slowed down enough to start being left behind by more and more men, and when she was relegated to the side of the line, she looked back at the wall clouded in white.

Everything was so tranquil, almost ethereally so, that she couldn’t have said, if she hadn’t known, that peace was over for Fort Briggs. There were no men atop the wall, keeping the cannons some company, but if Olivier closed her eyes, she could almost feel the contrary. She could pinpoint the silhouette of a woman against the wind, seeing them off. Olivier knew it wasn’t real, that Zinnia was still tucked in bed, even if she wanted with all her heart to believe she was there, watching over her despite the early hour.

And Olivier really did hope this wouldn’t be the last time she would see Zinnia. She really hoped this wouldn’t turn out to be a proper war, because like Zinnia herself had said, Olivier was not made of ice and steel. And if Drachma invaded right before their eyes, after having taken the lives of the soldiers beside her, Olivier would have no choice but to watch the enemy take over the fort and Zinnia with them. Perhaps she should’ve told the flower girl to go away for a while, to hide with her bookstore friend in North City. Still too far up north... Olivier thought now. Besides, there was no turning back now. What was done was done, and now Olivier just had to keep marching on and win this thing.

She really did have to come out on top now. She couldn’t let anything happen to Zinnia.

Longingly, Olivier locked eyes for a final time with the edge of her wall, stared for a few seconds, then exhaled and turned back to the path that lead into the mountain range.

Contrary to what she’d believed, Zinnia was, in fact, leaning towards a window upstairs with some other soldiers, watching their friends and colleagues leave. They had all seen Miles’ announcement on the board about the new double shifts while the situation remained the same to make up for the men who had left, and instead of having gathered to complain about the changes, the men had sat by the windows and watched, surly, the changes become real and closer as their friends grew more and more distant.

Zinnia had sat with Austin and a few others in silence. No one really knew what to say about this, it had been so sudden. Fear had already seeped into their heads, tormenting them with unpleasant images of the past and of those stories Buccaneer had always been telling them about war and loss.

As if he’d been reading Zinnia’s mind, Austin interrupted the silence.

“They’ll be alright,” Austin said. “Buccaneer was always saying that Drachma isn’t prepared to cross the range and meet us in an open field, we have weapons they don’t this time. Our men will be able
to win this war like we won the last one.”

Too optimistic, she thought. Much too optimistic. He was new here, regardless of how long he’d worked north. The inner workings of the fort were a mystery to anyone who hadn’t seen the soldiers at it for years, and neither of them had. All Zinnia knew was that on the other side of the mountains there was a nation strong enough to declare war on them any day and strong enough that there had had to be an Amestrian fort built in order to have someone stop them at the border. She didn’t really think Briggs men idiots nor incapable warmongers. Buccaneer had lost his arm in the previous war, and she’d known for a while that people had died where he hadn’t, or Briggs wouldn’t have a cemetery with old gravestones in it.

Difference between then and now was that Drachma had had time to prepare better for battle this time. So had Briggs, but Briggs was a much smaller power than an entire country’s army. They should have called for reinforcements before they’d ventured into the wilderness alone. Zinnia should’ve thought of that. She should’ve given ideas instead of insisting like a child that she wanted to accompany them. Now a big chunk of her people were alone against a superpower, and Zinnia was warm and safe inside the fort, watching them become specs in the distance.

She felt a shudder down her spine, regardless of the temperature.

“It’s not war yet,” Zinnia said softly. And that’s exactly what worries me. One day it would be, and when that day came she wouldn’t have the necessary mental tools to reassure herself that Briggs could still win it.

Austin tried to assuage her more than once, perhaps feeling responsible for her loneliness and like he had to take care of her now that all her closest friends had left the fort, and she tried to let him without making it too clear she was bothered by it. She knew he meant well, but deep down the only thing she wanted was to hide somewhere and just wait these next five days about.

For the next seventy-two hours, they convened when it was lunch time or dinner time, mostly because otherwise they would’ve wound up on their own. Austin had eventually made some friends here but most were either on late patrols or with Olivier.

“You’re scared?” Austin asked politely the two nights after they’d left.

Zinnia sat uncomfortable on her seat. She’d been avoiding looking moody enough that he’d ask her that question, because she didn’t think she was capable of lying to him about it just for the sake of keeping his mind clear of fear.

“Why would I be scared?”

“I don’t know. You look scared.”

And he stared. She tried to control how fast her heartbeat was so she wouldn’t look like she was scared.

“I’m pale because it’s cold, and because the food’s terrible.” She almost smiled at the realization that she’d said something that characterized every Briggs veteran, their loving hatred for the food. She was becoming one of them. “Doesn’t make me look very nice, no.”

“You do look nice,” Austin said before he could stop himself. Then he blushed when he became aware of how inappropriate that was.

“Thanks,” Zinnia said simply, with a smile.
"I meant—I didn’t mean it like—" He exhaled, trying to get his thoughts together. “It’s just been a while since I’ve seen … girls, you know?”

She laughed. “Not a lot of girls around here, true.”

“I wish there would be. I feel like I’m twelve ogling at you and General Armstrong.”

He realized he’d made it worse by including Olivier in that statement. Zinnia hadn’t looked bothered by the fact that Austin quenched his nostalgia towards girls by paying attention to Zinnia herself, but her face did fall at the mention of Olivier.

“Shit, sorry.”

“That’s okay, I guess,” she said, pensive. “I’m sorry it’s just me here now, she’s far prettier than I am.”

“She’s a different kind of pretty.” He grinned. “I’ve never met a man who didn’t love her and fear her at the same time.”

“You think I’m any different?” Zinnia laughed. “She scares the pants off of me.”

Now it was her turn to have said something completely unorthodox, even if she’d meant it as purely designation of how scary Olivier could be to her. She should not have mentioned pants, she should really not have.

“But you love her.”

Zinnia hadn’t expected to hear it from him, usually a bit coy and reluctant to say anything around the veterans. She’d known he was observant enough, and she knew by now that her relationship with their boss was no secret, but still… there was a line between being up to date with the gossip and getting to the heart of it with one look.

“I … suppose I do, yes.”

“You’re scared of her not coming back, aren’t you?” he pressed on.

She gave out a dry chuckle.

“What’s up with me being scared, Austin? Are you?”

“A little,” he admitted. “But I know it’s going to be okay. These guys are the best there are at what they do. Back at home,” he said, “we were threatened with having our superiors send us here because there are so many rumors about Briggs soldiers being the toughest out of all of us. They’re the main defense of our forces, just like Eastern Command is our strongest strength of attack. I knew, before coming here, these men would eat anyone alive, including me. That’s why I’m not really afraid, why you shouldn’t really be afraid. The general leads them. And there is no one as tough out there as she is’”

“I’m not scared,” Zinnia lied. “I know what they’re capable of.”

“You are scared of them not coming back. Not of war, not of losing it, just… of her not coming back to you.”

She promised me she would. Zinnia stared at him for a few moments.

“And you want to soothe me or something? Am I missing out?”
Austin smiled and blushed again.

“I just want you to know that if you need to talk or something… I’m here.”

She patted his shoulder. “I know, Austin. Quit worrying about it. Our job now is to wait them out. And we can do that better than they could, alright?”

Definitely, she thought. Zinnia tried to imagine Olivier being in her position. It was no secret that it most likely would have been almost impossible for Olivier to deal with all this, the waiting and the not knowing what was going on. Zinnia should feel lucky, after all, that it was this way and not the other way around. She almost managed a smile as she watched Austin’s expression.

Perhaps he was even more afraid for them than she was for Olivier.

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_For a long time we've been_

_Marching off to battle_

_In our thundering herd_

_We feel a lot like cattle_

_Like the pounding beat_

_Our aching feet aren't_

_Easy to ignore_

_Hey, think of instead_

_A girl worth fighting for_

The men echoed some stanzas of a song as they climbed. With the dawn, they had set on their course again. Mostly, they’d been silent, probably too sleepy yet to begin talking or to even complain about the cold and the lack of proper sleeping conditions. But within the hour Olivier had witnessed them come alive again, singing in muffled tones to pass the time.

Even now, at the back of the line, she could hear them sing. She wasn’t going to stop them, if it made this more bearable for them. She doubted, though, there was anything that might make this more bearable

“We should be stopping soon.” Miles said on her left. He’d fallen behind a few minutes ago to walk alongside her and had stayed when he’d seen she wasn’t about to shoo him away like she had with Buccaneer a day before.

Olivier looked before her at the men walking energetically and shook her head.

“There is no need to. There won’t be for hours.”

Miles guessed what she was thinking.

“They might not be tired, but you are.” he said. “We all got some hours of sleep. You didn’t.”
The previous night, as the one before it, she had insisted on keeping watch, tired and done as she was, because she needed them all alert and she needed time and space to think about what this could mean. The heart of war beat strong in her chest, but she also feared it. Olivier had never feared war, not once, not when she’d been close to dying in it, when that shrapnel had reached her temple and scarred her for life.

She feared this war with all her heart and soul, and she feared it in silence, because if her people found out how terrified she was of walking to meet the Drachman in a last battle, they would look at her and wouldn’t recognize her. General Armstrong was always thirsty for the blood she had helped not to spill fifteen years ago, not this feet-dragging mess who had fallen behind in formation, walking last alongside by Miles.

If they had known, if they’d even suspected she was scared of this war because of what it might strip away from her… what she had left behind to protect, then she wouldn’t be able to look into any of their eyes. She would only be able to stand there and endure their quiet judgment. And she would deserve that judgment.

“We’re not stopping so I can take a nap,” she said in the end. They wouldn’t stop until it was night and the cold made it unbearable to continue. Drachma was only some miles north, not that far away from them. They needed to be careful, and they needed the advantage of daylight.

“Perhaps we should. You won’t be at your best unless you sleep.”

She growled at him but knew he was right. If a fight came to be, she wouldn’t be able to do much more than just stubbornly keep fighting, not because she could but because she was unable to allow herself to stop, no matter how much she longed for rest. She needed it, she realized now. She needed to be useful.

“A few more miles,” she only said in the end, eyes forward. “Then we will stop.”

Her expression promised it to him. He nodded and left her alone for a few miles more, as she’d said. He saw that fear she strove to keep hidden, and he looked up at the clouds above and prayed so that she should never succumb to it. They needed her. Briggs may have been able to function in her absence, but her loss—both physical and figurative—would wreck them from the inside out. Olivier truly was their heart, she had always been, and she would always be, no matter who she loved or what she feared.

Miles knew, better than anyone. Miles would have given his life for her. He didn’t know a man on her fort that wouldn’t.

Tonight they drank but didn’t sing, because deep down they were worried, even if they tried very hard not to look it. Looking worried was among the many things they all were trying not to do while the boss was gone, and so far they were doing well. For the last day of the year, they were doing an excellent job at it.

Again, Austin and Zinnia had gathered, each other’s one go-to when the rest of their people weren’t here to spend the night, and they sat alone in a corner of the kitchens, waiting for the clock to strike twelve.

It had already been a few days since everybody had left, yet still not five, and Zinnia knew she couldn’t start to freak out yet. Olivier’s promise had always been a two-way promise: on the one
hand, that Olivier would be back before that time was other, and on the other than Zinnia wouldn’t lose her mind before either. Even so, even if the time was not yet up, Zinnia felt like a claw had taken over her heart and she couldn’t move.

“It’s been a good year,” Austin said after a while of sitting in silence, “hasn’t it?”

“What?” She hadn’t been listening.

“I mean, good things have happened, I guess. That makes the year better than bad.”

She giggled a little.

“I thought they’d sent you here to punish you.”

“Didn’t turn out favorably to them. This is nice. Nicer than it seemed at first…” He smiled. “Took a little getting used to.”

Zinnia snorted, although she had to admit that that last part was so true. “I wouldn’t have gone for ‘nice’, but okay.” In a way, Briggs was nicer than other places she had been. Maybe not as colorful and diverse, but it was still full of life and energy, and she needed that sometimes. And despite the men not having accepted her at first, she had no complaints about the current moment she was living. They had always, after those first weeks, been supportive of Zinnia’s stay in the fort and what it ultimately meant. She sighed. “It feels much longer than just a year, though. And it’s barely even been twelve months since I came north.”

“You’ve been a good addition to this place.”

“Yeah?” She laughed a little. “I couldn’t have said, at least at the beginning.”

“It was a bad idea to put you in the kitchens. Not your fault, though.”

“It was a lousy start, but I’m glad we all grew over it.”

“I think people just needed to see that you weren’t in charge. That… there were rules you were following to the letter to stay here.”

“Still, me being here has always been weird enough, it’s okay that people didn’t know what to think of me. At least now that’s done.”

“Yeah, people love you now.”

“But I’m not one of you,” she said, perplex. “I’m not a soldier.”

“You don’t need to be. You’re family now.”

Then…. the clock struck twelve and people slowly clanked their jars in silence. It was such a quiet moment, that Zinnia thought it felt like defeat in a way. This should have been loud, this should have been full of noise and songs and people, and instead over one third of the fort’s population was gone.

Austin looked at Zinnia. They didn’t really need to speak to settle on it all being very defeatist of Briggs men. “Happy 1915, I guess”

“Yeah… Happy new year.”

She couldn’t help but wonder where Olivier would be now, if they were somewhere safe from the snow and the enemy, somewhere warm. There wasn’t a big enough cave for them all, not with all
their numbers, but Zinnia had hope that they’d found somewhere to sleep.

Would they be celebrating as well? On rations and melted snow?

Or would they have gone to bed early, readying themselves for another day of walking forth without stopping?

Zinnia didn’t know where they were, and that made her feel as if her stomach was eating itself. She had no way to know if they were okay, if they had reached their destination yet. And even though Austin insisted on keeping her—and himself—entertained enough to not think about any of it, the thought that she was separated from them still hurt, even if she was paying attention to something else.

Deep down, wherever she was, whatever she was doing, she kept being reminded of what Olivier had gone north to do. Briggs was declaring war on Drachma, sooner than later, or perhaps the other way around, but it was a reality that would eventually reach the fort. When they did, the current inhabitants of it had no way to know when it had happened and who had fallen to make that happen.

Some might never be coming back at all, and beyond Zinnia’s own comprehension, she worried about how a certain loss would feel even if she hadn’t lost it yet. If Olivier fell, if Drachma got through to her, Zinnia wouldn’t know until the men came back. And that made her stomach churn undesciptionely hard.

She could picture it only to a certain extent, if she took it any further, she needed to shake her head and focus on something else for a while. Losing Olivier would be like stripping the planet of one of its seasons. Losing Olivier would be like losing winter.

_Winters are beautiful here_, she had said once, not that long ago. Zinnia hadn’t believed it, it had been winter that had forced her to take refuge in Briggs, but she did now. And now that winter was here to stay, she was alone and its beauty didn’t reach her because of that loneliness. Beauty in the right company could grow to become ecstatic, and now that of the winter was deemed cold and cruel by Zinnia because Olivier wasn’t there by her side to either watch the snow with her or warm their bed at night to share it with her.

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That night they had been too tired to look much further, but the first cave they had found had been too small, barely wide enough for twenty men, let alone for a hundred and twenty, and Olivier had taken one good look at the inside of the cave and shook her head. They needed to keep going, she wasn’t about to let a hundred of her people sleep in the snow with this disagreeable wind that had risen up in the past hour.

Luckily, after a long while, already dragging their feet on the snow, they had found a big enough cave to rest in, still a few miles away from the Drachman settlement. They had plopped in, built fires as best they could, illuminating the depths of the cave, and prepared for the night. At least now that they had shelter they wouldn’t need to worry excessively about the cold.

The food, on the contrary, was a different matter. They couldn’t make a big feast like they would have if they’d been at the fort, but they had at least something to eat by the fire.

It was the last night of the year and they would be spending it alone in the middle of nowhere, surviving on rations and appropriate clothes. Olivier knew these men would miss the noise of a party, but out there they couldn’t make any noise that would alert a passer-by of their presence. They
needed to do this incognito.

“General?” Miles called.

She turned around from the entrance of the cave, and he saw the bags under her eyes from the distance.

“Get in, we’re about to eat.”

“I’m coming, yes,” she said, turning back to the wind and the snow and the barren lands before her. She sat back down on the dry ground of the cave, near the barricade they’d build by the entrance so all the storms that rose at night didn’t seep indoors.

For all these days, all she’d been able to do was fall back in the formations and walk alone, looking back at the sights she was leaving behind. Briggs was already invisible behind them, but she kept looking back, over and over, as if she hoped to see its little lights at night. Even at day, her soldiers had surprised her with her body turned back. No one had said anything, but she had seen it in Miles eyes, how they all understood. She didn’t want them to.

She wanted to be the only one who missed someone, because at least that way she could be sure no one else had their heads in the clouds.

As she looked at the snow falling, she thought back to Zinnia and what she would be doing in the fort, if she was celebrating as it was tradition or she was in bed already, missing the company.

In these few days Olivier had been marching in the mountains, the thing she had missed the most aside from that company had been Zinnia’s body next to her at night. She hadn’t been able to sleep much during the hours she didn’t have watch. Despite what Miles had told her, she preferred to be always on watch, so she could let the rest of them sleep.

That night after a frugal dinner, though, one look from him was enough to have her move back to the inside of the cave to where she’d left her things. She set up a cot to sleep in and something to cover herself and lay down as she heard the conversations around her and at the front of the cave.

She tried to close her eyes and concentrate. Sleeping didn’t have to be hard, she didn’t have to fight it… And still she did.

She was alone, and she’d never known how to fall asleep alone.

In the end, after a few hours in which silence finally reached most parts of the cave, she managed to conjure the right image: that of Zinnia and her body heat right by her side.

And she fell asleep.

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They truly were the enemy. The way they’d set up camp, as if they owned the border, made Olivier’s blood boil. Briggs men were watching from a hill not far from there, still as trees in a windless day, and waiting for the perfect moment to get closer without being seen. They needed to get their hands on information, and little information they would get sitting in the now out of earshot.

For now, none of them was looking forward at the Drachman camp, but at their leader and Miles, who were both arguing about who should be the scapegoat that got to spy on the enemy.
“You’re recognizable, it should be me,” he was saying.

“And you’re not expendable, Miles,” she said in return. “I can’t lose you to these people. I’ll go.”

“I’d honestly prefer for them to catch me than for them to catch you.”

“Thankfully you’re not the one that gets to decide that sort of thing.”

“General, listen to reason. If you go, it will be immediate. They know your face already. They could probably pick you out of a crowd.”

“I don’t care. I’m not putting any more lives in danger.”

“Except your own, right?” said Buccaneer soullessly from a corner, sitting down on his luggage.

“This is not about me,” Olivier said angrily. “I need you to trust me with this, and to trust I will do it quickly and wisely enough that they won’t catch me. And if they do, I will need you to continue with this operation—without planning any rescues—and preparing for whatever is coming. Are we clear on that?”

“We’re over one hundred men. If you think we’re just going to—”

“You are,” she stated clearly. “Because I’m ordering you to.”

“Then I will opt for insubordination.”

Olivier grunted.

“We are in the middle of nowhere, and if you put me in a position that I have to go back to the fort to write the papers to get you a nice little cell somewhere, I will.”

“It would keep you out of that camp,” Miles said calmly.

She grunted again, louder.

“What makes you think you would infiltrate them more easily?”

“The fact that I’m not the one in charge of three hundred men and a fort. I’m invisible, Olivier,” he said, echoing a conversation they’d had years ago.

They’d been in her office, and he’d already been in Briggs for quite some time, and she’d made an observation he had never forgotten:

“Do you want to know why I didn’t hand you in to our superiors?” she’d said.

He’d shaken his head, curious enough about this spurt of honesty.

“Because you’re invisible, Miles. Even here, when you’ve earned your place, you choose to go by quietly without being seen. And I daresay you do a very good job at it. We may have need of a man like you one day,” she’d said. “And I’m counting on you for it. And for many other things, some of which require visibility. That which is not visible needs to learn to be so in the eyes of those who see everything.”

Now, he continued.

“I’m someone who they won’t notice.”
“I doubt there are many Ishvalan in their army,” she said, eyebrow raised.

“I will keep these tight,” Miles said, adjusting his goggles.

There was some silence, and some murmurs from the rest of the soldiers that made Olivier tap her foot on the snow impatiently.

“General…” Buccaneer said, “in all due respect, it should be Miles who goes. They will be looking for you.”

For the woman that signed the truce and didn’t end the war, she thought.

She grabbed Miles’ arm tight in her glove.

“Listen to me,” she said, looking him in the eye—or the closest thing to it. “It’s in and out, do you understand? Get a general feeling of the place, what their plans are, but do not interact. I want you here in an hour.”

Her voice was firm where her eyes weren’t. He saw it again, there, perfectly hidden in blue: her fear. Not just for a woman miles away in a fort, but for him. And for his fellow men. Olivier wasn’t a woman who wasted time being afraid for herself but for the people around her. It humanized her, even if she though she hid it well most of the time.

“I won’t disappoint you, sir,” he only said.

She let him go.

“Good, I wasn’t expecting you to. Now get the hell out of here.”

He did, he disappeared into the snow. Olivier watched him go. Thankfully, the weather had been somewhat kind on them so far, but it wouldn’t last long, she had a hunch about it.

If he’s not back within the hour, I will go drag him by the ear myself, she thought, even if she knew she wouldn’t do such a thing. Too much was at risk.

Olivier didn’t waste time worrying. She just watched the Drachman settlement, imagining what strategy Miles had followed. Had he knocked out a soldier and dressed in his clothes? Had he hidden close enough that he could hear what they were saying? Would he understand if they only spoke Drachman to one another? Although they would have no reason to, since they had no reason either to suspect they were being scrutinized.

She wondered—but didn’t worry—about everything until he was back, dressed in his uniform again and panting a little.

She looked at him, trying to find answers. He just shook his head.

“I didn’t have them divulge anything,” he said. “But it didn’t give me the impression that they were talking about battle plans.”

She cursed under her breath.

“We’ll need to send people in for longer periods of time,” he suggested.

She glared.

“Do you really think it wise?” she said. “If any of us gets caught, then it’s over before it’s even
“How else will we find out about anything?”

_But it’s near the fifth day already_,” she thought. The younger, most naive part of her thought.

“I don’t know,” she grunted.

“I can go back in, try to find something out. My Drachman is rusty but I figure I could talk to someone long enough for something to spill out,” Miles said, trying to cheer her up.

She thought about it.

“We’ll send someone else, they might recognize you if they see you around too much.”

“They’re too many to recognize me.”

She made a committal noise.

“Should we send word to the fort that it will take us longer to come back?” Miles asked.

“I don’t see why not. But they knew, going in, this would take time.”

“Maybe,” Miles said. “But they should know that if we don’t come back, it’s not because it’s war. They should all be up to date.”

“Alright,” she said, looking convinced although she certainly didn’t need to pretend. “We’ll send someone tomorrow.”

But when tomorrow came, the men of Briggs found out they had been locked inside their cave by a massive curtain of snow falling outside, the wind ranging between the snowflakes, hissing angrily and refusing to let anyone through.

Olivier looked at it, sheltered in her sleeping bag, and felt tempted to go out there and cut it all up with her sword, make her way back to the fort as a messenger and bury her face in Zinnia’s neck to tell her what the plan was.

But Miles caught her with her eyes on the storm, and shook his head slowly. She didn’t need him to elaborate, she knew he wouldn’t let her or anyone cross that blizzard for the life of him.

There was some talk on that first day about who to send when the storm cleared, or even when it wasn’t at its most furious, but when they tried to ascertain if it was even weather one could walk in, they’d all realized it would be impossible to go back to Briggs. The only they might still do is send a spy over to Drachma, because Olivier refused to sit tight for days until the sky cleared and come back home with her hands empty.

On the first day of the storm, they managed to sneak Miles back into the Drachman formations, and he returned with some more information regarding something about ‘crimson’ and a plan, but nothing else. On the second, the other soldier they sent to spy on Drachma lasted an hour and had to come back, frozen to bits. On the third, they woke up to a dead body by the edge of the cave. The cold had seeped in too far and killed him.

They couldn’t even bury him.

It was too cold, too windy to go outside.
Instead, they sat and mourned.

Olivier, though, Olivier grew angry.

Chapter End Notes

Posting a little bit earlier than usual because lately I've replaced my posting time with the writing of the first original project I've tackled in six or so years ^^
“Please stop pacing.” Austin told her.

“It’s been more than five days. She said five days. They should be back right now. If only I knew where they’d gone, I could go see if…”

“Zinnia,” he said. “Please stop. You’re giving me a headache.”

But she kept going.

“I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe they’re not here.”

Austin groaned. “Even our MM batches take longer than this to go there and return. They’re definitely taking longer this time too.”

“No,” Zinnia said firmly. “Olivier said five days. When have you known her to make a wrong estimation?”

“I haven’t been here long enough to tell…” Austin mumbled matter-of-factly.

“Well, let me tell you: she doesn’t. She’s pragmatic enough to figure things out before she does them.”

“Exactly. She’ll be fine. This is not the first time she does something like this. They say she—”

“Fought in the war, yes. She did. And it left a scar. I’d like for her to come back in one piece this time.”

“I’d like for them all to come back in one piece…” Austin murmured.

“You think I don’t?”

“I don’t know. You’re always going on about her.”

“My worry isn’t centered just on her,” Zinnia said, and she wondered for just a moment how easy it would be to tell that was a lie. It must have been obvious that the bulk of her worry was for Olivier, even if she didn’t like the thought of having acquaintances out in the open when a super-powered nation was waiting to open fire on them any day. “My friends are there, too,” Zinnia finished angrily.

“I know, I’m sorry. I just… it’s getting on my nerves, your pacing.”

She abruptly stopped and took a seat, supporting her chin on her hand.

“I’m just saying it’s not normal for them to still be there. We should do something.”

“What do you want to do?” But Austin should’ve known better than to ask that. She wanted everything at once, everything served on a platter, everything to be allowed for her to do. And that was not good for him, who had to stand there, feeling responsible for her, and listen to her crazy ideas all day along as they both tried not to lose their minds.
“I…” She started thinking at the speed of light. If she could do anything, what would she do? If she was allowed to wish for anything, no matter how disproportionate or insane, what would she choose to wish for? She didn’t have to go through many options. It came to her at once, and she saw Austin shiver in anticipation before she even said it. “I think I should go get them, see if they’re okay.”

He shook his head fast.

“Nuh-huh. General Armstrong would kill me if she ever heard I’d let you go.” He was the one who began pacing now, gesticulating wildly as he did. “You’re supposed to stay here, we all are. You can’t just—the whole point of you staying here is that you’re safer than out there.”

Zinnia crossed her arms.

“If they’re not safe, then I don’t give a damn about my own safety.”

“They’re as safe as can be right now. I’m sure they are. These are the best men there are at this. They were trained for this.”

“How do we know? How can we be sure they’re fine? What if it’s started? What if we’re at war and we don’t know?” She clapped a hand to her mouth.

Austin walked to her and gently took her wrists, looking her right in the eye, unafraid. Maybe this marked he was truly, and had been for a long time, a man of Briggs.

“You can’t go out there,” he said, his tone final. “Not because of me or what I’m saying, but because of her. If she’s not safe, she wouldn’t want you to risk your own safety just to see what she’s going through.” She looked away now, and he knew it was time to get serious, to tell it like it was and shoo away any thought she might be entertaining of crossing the border. “You will not be able to do anything, Zinnia. You’ll be helpless against an army, if our people have been captured.”

But Zinnia looked into his eyes again, and for a moment he saw her fear melt away in the resolution of her voice:

“I can’t just stay here and let them come. I need to do something.”

Austin sighed. He was going to have to keep fighting her, holding her off, wasn’t he?

“You can’t.”

“Sure can. I’m going to.” And it was like the thought had just taken full form in her mind, her pupils dilated, and her expression was no longer firm but dreamy as she stood up and walked slowly towards the door.

“Zinnia…” he called, but it was futile. She was already planning what to take with her, when to go, who to tell.

She went upstairs and he followed her, trying to get her to listen to reason over and over again as she mutely packed things in a bag and went to fetch a snow uniform downstairs to don. He kept telling her that she didn’t know where they were, that she had no idea how to navigate around the mountain range alone and without the knowledge they had taken away, but it had mattered little to her.

In the end, though, Zinnia looked at him and saw a boy that was wasting his time worrying about her. But no one had worried about her except Olivier in a long time, so it knocked her off her feet. She couldn’t just leave without giving him something in return, even if that something turned out to be words. Hadn’t she been queen of those words time ago? Couldn’t she make them turn magic now
through her breath?

“I already know what you think, but can you please just understand that I need to go?”

He looked at her, silent for once.

“Maybe they’re safe, you’re right. But maybe they aren’t. And whatever reason there is for them being late, I need to know. Or I’ll go crazy in this place. And, trust me, you won’t be looking forward to the moment where I’m so out of my mind you’ll have to lock me in a cell.”

Her rage was, after all, legendary. Only Briggs men did not know yet, and she preferred that they never had to. It wouldn’t be pleasant for any parties involved.

“I understand,” he just said. “Be careful.”

She was ready to go, then.

“I can’t promise when I’ll be back,” she said, “but I can promise you I’ll be back with them.”

He helped her with her bag on the way down to the gate.

“If anything goes wrong for so much as half a second, you come back, you hear me?” Austin said, firmly. She smiled at him. Those words had been so unlike him, he was usually a cinnamon roll. He must have been really worried for her, for everyone. “Don’t risk your life unnecessarily. And most importantly, don’t risk mine. I’m not looking forward to having Olivier behead me.” He smiled, even though his words were harsh.

Zinnia smiled back.

“She won’t behead you,” she said.

Austin handed her her own bag, realizing he still had it, and she took it.

“Have a safe trip;” he said.

Zinnia opened the door and held it for a moment as she nodded to him. And then she started walking, alone, into the wilderness.

She wanted it to feel exhilarating, as if she’d gone to the tallest building in Amestris and looked down at the floor and the tiny people walking on it, but it didn’t. It felt… like she had to hurry, because she wasn’t going fast enough, like she couldn’t marvel at the world around her because she had this inescapable goal she couldn’t run faster towards.

Zinnia had seen Briggs unfold before her prior to this trip, but it had been relatively closer to the wall, in the safety of company. Now she walked alone, and it gave her the strangest of sensations, that as she watched everything around her while she walked, there were thousands of little eyes watching her walk north.

She’d packed maps, just in case, but she trusted she wouldn’t need to look at them often. She’d drafted the Flower Route, because Buccaneer had decided he was better off watching, so she was already familiarized with the surroundings, at least for a theoretical point of view. Her heart sped up a little at the thought of adventures, but her brain soon shut that down. Zinnia wasn’t here on a recreational trip, she was here because somewhere deep inside her she could feel something was
Austin hadn’t been updated on that, because he probably wouldn’t have believed her, or would have tried to hold her back anyway.

Truth was… if she’d told him, maybe she would have let him convince her that everything was fine. But right now she needed to maintain her convictions, and she needed to believe in them. They would take her to Olivier, they would take her farther up north than she had ever been.

She was to cross a border for love, and a younger version of her, still tucked within, smiled at the thought. Once, the only prospect of love she’d known had been tied to her tiny town in Central.

Now, it encompassed the entire world.

Zinnia walked until she found a small cave to spend the night in, already deep into the heart of the mountains, and when the sun fell completely she gathered some wood to make fire and prepared to spend the night.

It was odd, being alone, but it was odder even the fact that she was so in such a setting. Hours ago she’d been warm and accompanied at Briggs, and sooner than later she’d traveled towards loneliness and the cold. And her body felt the change more acutely than her mind had. Her mind wasn’t yet accustomed to the new situation, even if it had been the reason she’d set off on to this trip in the first place.

She barely slept that night, thinking about everything that had happened lately, how quickly it all had seeped into their lives and how unlikely it was that they would ever get rid of it.

Olivier had been right, this war was here to stay, and there was only way one through it. Briggs would fight, because it was their duty to. They, unlike Zinnia, couldn’t cower under a table until it was all said and done, they had to face it and they had to risk death to win.

Although, truth be told, Zinnia thought now, she had left the warm embrace and protection of the fort to look this war eye-to-eye and take Olivier back with her before the war exploded into their lives completely.

It was what was right, going out of her way to see… just to see if they all were alright, if they were safe and sound somewhere or if they’d already fought battles. She hoped with all her heart that night that they hadn’t.

Close to dawn, she finally managed to fall asleep. Her mind had suddenly been devoid of anything else to analyze, and slowly the thought of Olivier, warm and safe somewhere like this very cave, lulled Zinnia to sleep.

For a few hours, neither wind nor cold woke her.

But when the new day arose, crisp and icy like a fresh snowflake, Zinnia opened her tired eyes to the light and, after a brief breakfast of old food from the kitchens, she kept marching on the snow, slow but unstoppable.

She had one goal and she would meet it.

For the love of all nice things, Zinnia would find the Briggs troops and she would come home with them. They all needed to be home. No war is ever truly easy to win on enemy ground.

She didn’t actually follow a map until sunset, when the scant light that shone on the ground forced
her to revisit her strategies and she had to take a look at her calculations for the route and the paths surrounding it. She wouldn’t spend the night outside, it could get really cold without sunlight, and she was walking right into a storm, the clouds graying and darkening in the horizon she moved towards.

In the end, Zinnia couldn’t help but think about giving up. Because just walking didn’t give her much else to do except worry, and she kept feeling deep in her heart that something was wrong. It pulsed as her heart did, too. And every half a second there it was, that… sticky dread that wouldn’t go anywhere even if she tried to worry about other things, such as the cold and her tiredness.

Her physical reaction to being on the outside in these temperatures, alone, did count for something, but nothing weighed as heavy within her as knowing she was, for all she knew, walking to nowhere. Zinnia recognized the lands she passed through, because she’d studied them with Buccaneer to draw the route, but eventually, the next morning, she had to leave the route behind. It didn’t lead into Drachman territory as it could have, sticking mainly to the mountains, and if she wanted to find Olivier, she wouldn’t find her on marked grounds.

She would have to take it farther than anyone else had taken it.

Now, with the new day, she realized how little light there was, even though it was quite early in the morning. She looked up at the sky and saw the conglomeration of clouds, like a puzzle of different shades of grey that threatened to clash against one another, and there she had her answer.

She was getting closer and closer to the eye of the storm, and everything was getting harder, colder, steeper.

Zinnia had brought some food and warm clothes with her, but time played against her now. It had been three days already, counting the one when she had left. She wouldn’t last much longer, but she couldn’t just turn back and arrive empty-handed. She would rather learn how to survive in the deadly cold of Briggs than return without Olivier.

So she kept moving, without really making the choice to. She didn’t think about it, she just kept putting one foot behind the other, scraping snow off of her boots from time to time, and looking for the next cave where to go.

A few hours later, the storm began to discharge snow and ice on her, the wind furious on her back and sides, shaking her with violence with every step she tried to take. Zinnia endured for an hour, maybe two, teeth clattering and limbs getting number by the minute. There was nothing in this vast and definitely less steep part of the range and she knew the valley was coming to an end, which would make finding a place to take shelter at much more difficult.

The storm was at its worst when she was about to give up, to just… lay down in the snow and let the elements take her. She couldn’t go anywhere, she was too far away from Briggs and too close to Drachma, too close to the Flower Route to be taken in by the enemy without suspecting where she was coming from.

No, she either stayed where she was and died in the cold, a frugal death for a frugal life, or stood up to the wind for a little longer, just a little longer, until she found somewhere to rest in.

Not many steps further, there it was. A hill that led to a mountain, covered in thick trees and thicker snow, and Zinnia climbed it slowly, with all the patience she no longer enjoyed, because it was the last chance. Wherever she ended up in this mountain, either under a tree and some branches or a ditch in the floor, she couldn’t go any further.
She found it halfway up the mountain, the entrance to a cave that seemed large enough to let plenty of wind in, but she didn’t question it twice. Squinting her eyes to see past the curtain of snow, she worked towards it.

There was an odd piling of something, covered in white, right at the entrance. She almost tripped on it, that was how she noticed it. And when she looked at it again, to see what it was, she realized with a start that it wasn’t an inanimate object.

It was an arm, twisted in an impossible shape, buried in the snow and dirt.

She gasped and cried out, scared. But there was no blood on the body—bodies, she corrected herself, so they hadn’t been attacked.

Had they… had they died because of the cold?

She all but run into the cave, frozen tears on her cheeks, and trembling, not from the cold but from the shock. It didn’t occur to her, though, that there being dead people meant that there had been people there not long ago or might there still be. And she didn’t stop to check for uniforms either. She didn’t stop to think that maybe all she loved was dead.

But she run into the entrance of the cave and what she saw made her stop sobbing at once.

“Zinnia?” asked doubtfully a small voice a few feet deep into the cave. “What the hell are you doing here?” It was asked in such a tiny way, so feebly, as if this was a dream. But Zinnia responded the only way she knew.

She dropped her bag and ran to that voice.

She had chased after that voice for miles and miles, past mountains and lakes, through thick showers of hail and snow.

She dropped on her knees before that voice, and in the warmth of the cave she could finally cry.

“Olivier…” she cried out. “You’re alive.”

Olivier put her arms around Zinnia, even if she was wet and cold, and she buried her face in the furs Zinnia had come covered in.

“Of course I’m alive…” she said, but her tone wasn’t firm. Sometime ago the snow had swallowed any firmness, any resourcefulness. She’d been stuck in this cave for too long now, lost to a storm. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I saw bodies,” Zinnia sobbed. “I saw bodies and I didn’t know who they were. But… you’re not among them.”

“We lost people,” Olivier said. “We’ve been here a few days, and the storm was getting worse. I wanted to come back to you.”

“You did?”

“We know war is almost here. It’s happening this time,” she said, serious. “This month, we will be at war again.” Her voice was devoid of the emotion Zinnia had once known Olivier to feel regarding war. “I wanted to come back and tell you we might stay here longer, to find out what we could.”

“It’s okay…” Zinnia muttered. “It’s okay, I’m here now. I know now.”
Olivier kept hugging her for a few more seconds, each second a reminder that it was real, that it wasn’t a hallucination of hers. Zinnia was really here.

“How bad it is out there?” Buccaneer asked.

Zinnia looked up now and saw he was still deeper into the cave, huddled in his uniform next to Miles.

“It’s this bad for a few miles, then it clears.”

He sighed.

“We can’t make it that far. There’s wounded.”

Zinnia gasped. Dead and wounded...

“Frostbite,” Olivier said sadly. “We’ve been taking turns sleeping in the depths, but someone eventually always has to take the entrance. Some people didn’t wake up,” she just said.

“I’m so sorry…” Zinnia mumbled now. Olivier stroked her cheek and tried to smile.

“It’s alright. These things happen.”

“It’s not. It’s not alright. No one should be dead.”

There it was now, the sinking weight in her heart had been this: the bodies piled up at the entrance, lost forever. They had names, they had families, friends. And they would rest here forever, away from their fort, away from their lives.

Zinnia realized now, they could never carry all those bodies back to Briggs.

“People die,” Olivier just said. “I know it’s not easy for you to see right now, but people just… die. And they died on duty. There’s no bigger honor.”

Zinnia said nothing. Olivier took her into her arms again, put Zinnia’s head to her shoulder and upper chest, and Zinnia rested there, her perennial home. She kept feeling the tears stream down her face as Olivier stroked her hair.

“It’s just the way it is,” Olivier kept saying, but she didn’t sound convinced, she sounded distant… lost, somehow. And Zinnia didn’t think it was because of the deaths or the cold. She was more resilient than that.

“What happened?” Zinnia asked.

“We got what we needed and were heading back,” Miles said, his voice also much much weaker than usual. Maybe it was the cave. “But the storm got us lost. We were lucky to find this place.”

Zinnia flinched. Lucky?

“But it wasn’t big enough for us all,” he finished solemnly.

Zinnia looked around. She didn’t see the one hundred and twenty men she had seen leave the fort, their numbers had been greatly decreased to almost half of that.

And if the war was coming, how could they expect to win it with almost fifty men less?
“We need to get you all out of here,” she said.

Olivier shook her head.

“Not in this weather.”

“Okay,” Zinnia said, “then when it clears. How much food do you have left?”

“Almost none.” Buccaneer roared softly. He, of course, was the biggest of them all and would miss food the most. “It’s been running out these past few days, we’ve been rationing it.”

“I brought some,” Zinnia said. “Will that do?”

But the faces she saw were all the answer she needed. If the storm didn’t clean soon, they would have a choice between dying in the cold or dying of starvation.

“We just have to be patient,” Miles said.

Zinnia molded once again to the shape of Olivier, feeling her warmth and letting it fill her. She had missed that warmth more than anything. She had longed for it, now it was a part of her again.

“How long have you already been patient for?” she said softly to the quiet cave.

Olivier took in a deep breath and planted a kiss to Zinnia’s forehead.

“Not long,” she lied.

She would still have to be patient some more, and then, if she was lucky, she could bring the rest of her soldiers home.

But she had already failed, hadn’t she? She had brought death, however nobly, to the lives of the men that had followed her to the depths of the border. She had failed, and she had failed them.

It wasn’t much longer. Food had already run out, and they were existing on boredom and Buccaneer’s complaints, when the storm began to clear. Snow fell, but not copiously, and the wind wasn’t half as severe as it used to be a day ago.

Zinnia had awakened in Olivier’s arms. They hadn’t moved one inch from one another all night, and the day before they had spent it together except for bathroom breaks, not talking but communicating in more than one way. Their eyes, their bodies together, that had said a lot more than Zinnia could have expressed with words. She felt that her old writing self had gotten rusty in the snow.

But that day she had opened her eyes to find a clearer sky, white and light grey, almost blinding from its intensity, and she had known.

When Olivier had stirred next to her and opened her eyes as well, Zinnia had said the first words since coming into this cave, and she had said them quietly, an echo of the words that had bound both their fates forever:

“General,” Zinnia had said, “it’s time to come back to the fort with me.”

Chapter End Notes
I don’t really delve much into the Drachman conflict because I’m kind of following canon, and I need to keep it that way so it fits what I want to do later on, but I can recommend a really good fic that reimagines what happened with Drachma and Amestris, if I haven’t already. It’s called The Northern Theatre, by Inkuisitivskins, and it kept me on the edge of my seat for its entirety.

Also, this is the final chapter of the second arc, and I’m beyond excited because there is still much else to come, of course, and it will be a lot closer to canon this time, with a few minor alterations *wink wink*.

Thank you for sticking with me this far :3 It's being one of the best experiences of my life.
Burying them

Chapter Notes

Here's the beginning of Arc III :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The walk back home was painfully slow. They hadn’t eaten properly in days and some had frozen toes to walk on, and the path through the mountain was difficult. To top it all off, they had found this cave they were departing from in a hurry, lost already in the blizzard, and now they didn’t know where they were in the vastness of the mountain range, well past the border. Thankfully, Zinnia had found the cave straying a little from the path of the main routes, so she told them she should have no trouble finding out what would be the easiest way back, or even use the tracing of the new route to find shorter ways home.

Still, none of it was pleasant. Despite the storm having cleared a little, it hadn’t stopped snowing, and the temperatures were low enough to be hard to walk in. Their breaths formed steam columns in the air, and they all tried to keep their mouths shut, tried to preserve all heat as they descended and ascended, crept through the crevices of the mountain.

Zinnia didn’t leave Olivier’s side, and neither did Miles and Buccaneer. The three of them had surrounded Olivier: Zinnia walked alongside her, Miles behind her, Buccaneer up front, as if they feared she would fall and never get up without them there. And they knew, instinctively, why they had to be—because she had lost the very same people she’s sworn oaths to protect and was blaming herself instead of blaming the war, instead of accepting it at face value like she had told Zinnia to.

They didn’t speak, other than to mutter an occasional ‘be careful’ when the road up ahead got rough. The rest of the time they spent in silent company until they finally saw Briggs’ silhouette in the distance and the gasps of sheer glee took over all of them. They were finally home.

The last miles stretched out in time, even if the terrain wasn’t difficult to navigate. But their limbs were tired now after the long walk, and they were all weaker than they would have liked to be. Some began to wheeze loudly, some started to cry in silence, and Olivier got rid of her entourage to tell them all to keep going.

“Come on, we’re almost there,” she said. “We can’t stop now.”

And they could have, but giving up when they were this close felt like defeat. And Olivier had already been defeated a myriad of times in the past few days. Over and over again like she was a little girl against the world. In a way, she had always been, and times like this acted as a reminder that she needed to keep maturing, that she couldn’t stay anchored to the present and needed to keep her eyes on the future up ahead.

The future, right now, was a war. And things being like they were, they would likely lose it. The pride of the Amestris military would fall in battle and Briggs would be destroyed. And she would die before she saw any of that happen. They all needed to recover fast and prepare for the war that sooner than ever was coming at them, armed to the teeth. The alternative was perishing, now more than ever.
There were soldiers waiting for them at the entrance of the fort, having abandoned their posts to be there as soon as someone had given the alarm that the expedition was back. The reunion was short, though. Soon, the men at Briggs realized all their friends hadn’t returned. Questions were asked, and Olivier answered them calmly, as if this was routine. It was supposed to be so, but it wasn’t. It could never be. Death was never routine, even if the deepest nature of it was.

She gave the order that the first thing they would do after everyone had received medical attention and rested a little would be to hold a memorial—without bodies—for the dead. It was the least she could do, to commemorate those fallen men in the fort they had defended with their lives.

Zinnia didn’t leave her side for one second, even if she tried to remain a prudent distant away when Olivier spoke to her men in order not to interfere. Even as they queued in the medical room, waiting for the doctor to be finished with his current patients, Zinnia didn’t move away. She kept fidgeting, wondering if she should say something or if no words in the world would possibly help. What had happened had been a tragedy, but she knew Olivier would call it a necessary tragedy. She had the information she needed regarding Drachma, and Zinnia knew she acknowledged that it’d been at the cost of people’s lives, and that it hurt her that it was so, but that she wouldn’t cower from that fact.

Eventually, as the line got shorter and shorter, Zinnia dared to speak after a long, long time.

“How’re you holding up?” she said softly.

“I’m fine,” Olivier answered without looking at her. She was not fine. “Tired.”

Zinnia rubbed her arm in case she was cold. She looked like she was.

“You should rest.”

Olivier shook her head.

“I need to be at the cemetery with everyone else.”

Zinnia nodded. They hadn’t brought any of the bodies back. Because bringing some but not all would have been dishonest and ruthless of Olivier. They had all died, they all deserved the same burial and to be reunited in death with those that would miss them most. And if they all couldn’t get that, neither would. Olivier would remember them all the same, and she would make sure no one forgot. A funeral would be had after everyone had eaten and rested, and Zinnia knew Olivier would be at the cemetery long before anyone else, her grief harsher and deeper than anyone else’s. These losses were her responsibility, and she would mourn them like no one else could.

“I’ll go with you, then,” Zinnia said.

“No,” Olivier said. “I want you here. You walked forth and back in a matter of days, you must be more tired than any of us.”

Zinnia shook her head.

“I feel fine. I want to help.”

“Help me by staying aside. This isn’t something you’ll understand.”

When the doctor called for the next, Olivier followed, and for a moment she expected Zinnia to turn back, but Zinnia stepped forward with her. Her words had hurt her; she had spent months in this fort with everyone else, training to be able to do what they all did, and sharing a roof and a schedule with them, sharing both calamities and joy like any other soldier. And yet now Olivier brought up again
that no matter what happened she was never going to be one of them. Not in the way that mattered to Olivier. Any other person would have turned back and left her alone, but Zinnia knew why Olivier was saying it, and she knew Olivier was only pushing her away so Zinnia wouldn’t see in what state she was really in.

The doctor confirmed it wasn’t a precarious state, but that she would still need to rest for the next few days.

He measured her vitals and watched her with a prominent frown for a little while. He had seen her at her worst before, or what he had thought was her worst. This proved just how far Olivier was ready to put everything at risk, including her own health, in order to keep the order in the fort and manage to keep everyone safe. Or… close to everyone.

“Exposure, malnutrition, and exhaustion,” he said while looking her in the eye. “Nothing extremely severe, sir. But you should take it easy from now on.”

“There’s much to do,” Olivier just said, getting her clothes back on once the doctor had looked at everything he’d needed to. “I’m fine.”

Zinnia abstained from replying that he had just told her she wasn’t, that the whole point of this was to make her see that.

The doctor eyed Olivier calmly.

“Your body needs to recover, general. You have spent too many days out there in the cold. You all need rest.”

Olivier stepped off the examining table and gently pushed Zinnia to sit on it. She looked at her, surprised.

“I don’t—”

But the doctor quietened her as well and turned to Olivier again.

“This is no game. I’ve been told of the news,” he said, serious. “If what’s coming comes early, we can’t have seventy men coughing and unable to function normally.” He stared at her. “We can’t afford you to be sick.”

Olivier knew this very well, better than anyone. She kept blaming herself for what happened, and she hadn’t been sick then—just like, in her eye, she wasn’t sick now. Whatever came to be, Olivier would find a way to be responsible for it.

“I’ll rest,” she promised with a grumble. “Now, her.”

Her… meaning Zinnia.

The doctor didn’t take long this time. She appeared to be in perfect health, if only a bit malnourished as well, and tired. Very, very tired. And yet nowhere as frazzled as Olivier was.

“What I’ve to tell you is what I’ve advised everyone. Rest. Take some time off to sleep and eat. In a few days, things will return to normal.”

_We don’t have a few days_, Olivier thought. _It could be any moment now._

“I’ll make sure to do that,” Zinnia said to him with a nod as she got off the table as well. “You take it
easy too, there’s still some people coming.”

The doctor saluted her with a weak smile.

“I live to serve,” he said. Then: “General.”

Olivier tried to exit the room first, heading nowhere but doing so very speedily, when Zinnia grabbed hold of her wrist.

“Coming to the kitchens?” she asked.

“I’m needed upstairs.”

Zinnia sighed. Nobody needed her now, they were all either queuing to get a diagnosis from the doctor or in their own bunks, sleeping it off. Some, though, would be in the kitchens eating as much as they could. That was where Zinnia had planned to go. She missed the abundant, very often terrible, lunches Briggs had to offer.

“It’ll just be ten minutes. We need to eat,” she said, using that ‘we’ as a way to convince Olivier.

“Ten minutes…” Olivier echoed, but conceded.

On their way, the clack of their footsteps on the floors disturbed Zinnia’s thoughts. She kept feeling that there was something wrong, aside from everything that already was beyond wrong, and she had a hunch that it had to do with the two of them. Zinnia had thought that the past couple of days trapped in a cave had united them, since they hadn’t been apart for anything longer than five minutes, but now it just occurred to her that maybe it had had the opposite effect, at least on Olivier’s side of the equation.

“Are you pissed at me?” she asked. It was the simplest question she felt she could ask, something that would grant her a quick and certain answer instead of having her draw more lines in the sand to figure this out.

“I’m not pissed at anyone,” Olivier replied, in a tone that spoke volumes about how untrue that sentence was.

“Then why are you acting like you were?”

Olivier sighed loudly.

“I’m pissed, just not at anyone in particular.”

Zinnia tried to touch her and she recoiled.

“Do you want me to leave you alone?” Zinnia asked honestly. Because now that was the only thing she could come up with that would explain Olivier’s behavior.

And she saw it clear in Olivier’s hesitation.

She dropped her hand.

“I’ll be in the room if you need me,” she said, even a little cheerfully. She could understand needing to be alone, she could understand everything and she wasn’t capable of blaming Olivier for needing a minute to process everything.

“Weren’t you going to eat something?”
Zinnia shook her head with a sad smile.

“I’m no longer hungry.”

And Olivier didn’t know better than to blame herself. She let Zinnia go, without being able to say that she didn’t want to be alone, she just wanted to be with her in silence.

Words were worth so much now she didn’t feel courageous enough to say any out loud.

They didn’t have a priest. Briggs had no specific religion, and the men in it hadn’t either for a long, long time. Most abandoned their faith, if they had any, when they entered the military, but today Olivier wished some of them still retained some elaborate concept of an afterlife to evoke it for these men she had lost—they had lost.

These men whose bodies wouldn’t be buried here, although their memory would be.

In place of a priest, she was the one who should speak. But she didn’t have any idea what to say. Most of the men who attended this small funeral had already had a few hours to rest, she hadn’t. She had gone up to her office and reviewed everything regarding the weapons they had in the fort, she needed everything ready all of the time, just in case. She hadn’t slept a wink or eaten in hours, despite the doctor’s orders. She couldn’t bring herself to rest for five minutes, and today she hadn’t had Miles around to tell her to. She had pushed all of them away.

And now they all stood in front of her, heads down in reverence to their fallen friends. And she had no words, again.

“There’s nothing I can say that will change what happened,” she finally started saying. They had gathered in the cemetery, although they had nothing to bury, and Olivier had already made calls in order to have a tombstone made with the names of the dead, in their honor. “We all know what awaits us. We all know the risks of war, and the risks that come before it. But none of us look forward to our last day. These men we mourn today… they faced the very risks that led them to their end. They proudly stood between death and us and took it when there was nothing else to do. It could have been any of us, but it hasn’t. One day it will be. One day, someone else will mourn us. Today it is our turn, and we do it gladly,” Olivier said. “But we must continue. This is not the end, it’s only the beginning of something greater than any of us. Gentlemen,” she said, louder, “the enemy is out there, preparing for attack. And very soon they will lay hands on our territory and try to bring down our wall. And when they do, we will be here, waiting. And whatever happens then, death will not stop us now. It can’t.”

Then she moved to the back of the crowd. No one clapped, they were all in deep silence.

Some more people stepped ahead to say some words, nothing elaborate or fancy, just something from the soul about those they had lost. Mostly friends and acquaintances did so, and Olivier watched them alone from behind the crowd, trying to still her pounding heart. She still couldn’t believe she had let this happen. No one was supposed to die in that expedition. No one was supposed to die… Yet these were the first deaths in the fort after fifteen years. And they were her fault.

She wiped a stray tear off her face, and immediately her eyes caught sight of a silhouette approaching the scene slowly from the fort, making a sure but slow way to the cemetery. A few steps more, and Olivier realized it was Zinnia. Once she made her way past everyone and stood by Olivier side,
Olivier took her hand in hers without a second thought, as if nothing that had happened today meant anything to her, as if she wasn’t hurt.

“Sorry I’m late,” Zinnia whispered, listening intently to the man currently speaking.

“It’s alright,” Olivier said.

Silence fell when the man who was speaking now finished doing so and the next one took his time to walk to the center of the snowed-in cemetery to speak. This was as solemn as Zinnia had ever seen these people.

“I… I’m sorry. About earlier,” Olivier murmured. “I’m really not pissed at you. It’s just been… too much lately.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. I didn’t take it to heart.”

Olivier squeezed her hand.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

Zinnia squeezed back.

“It’ll be okay,” she said. “You’ll see.”

“They’re dead,” Olivier only said. “It doesn’t matter to them anymore.”

“It matters to you. What happened and what can happen now.”

“Yes…” Olivier murmured. “So much. These are my people, I can’t just…” But she didn’t say anymore.

Zinnia leaned her head on her shoulder.

“It wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have done anything. No one could have.”

_I could’ve. I should’ve gone to the mountains myself. This was up to me_, Olivier thought.

“You’re trembling,” Zinnia said, having suddenly realized it.

“I’m just cold,” Olivier lied.

“Let’s go back inside,” Zinnia said. She tried to guide her back in, but Olivier stood her ground, resolute.

“No,” Olivier said, “I want to listen to this.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Zinnia repeated after some silence. “You know that, right? You don’t have to stay here in punishment.”

“I’m not going back in,” Olivier said calmly. “But you go, and I’ll meet you later.”

“No,” Zinnia said softly. “I’ll stay too.”

And so they did, until the words died down and people left the cemetery one by one. Olivier stayed till the very end, unable to leave this sinking ship before anyone else did. She looked at the gravestones and the space where she would place the new one when it arrived. Briggs may have
been built on many things, but one thing she had always hated having as the foundations of her home was the deaths. Many before her, some in her first years, and these few under her command. The greatest shame for her was having had younger men than her die in her endeavor to protect the country. The greatest shame was not having died with them.

*Bury me under this fort*... Olivier had always said, loud and clear, when thinking about the event of her own death. The only thing she could give these dead men was the same treatment she would have liked to have, give them a place to be remembered at Briggs.

When there was nothing but snow in the wind and Zinnia’s quiet sobbing, Olivier finally snapped out of it. Her soul weighed heavy on her, after so long without paying attention to it, and it demanded rest. Blessed rest for a minute or two, a chair or a bed would be enough for her, even in the middle of the kitchens.

She turned to Zinnia slowly and saw herself reflected in those big brown eyes and she didn’t cry. She leaned forward and let Zinnia’s arms wrap her in a hug. Now, she could crumble. Now, it was safe for her to let go. It was time for her to mourn.

They went back inside, and at some point it became impossible for Olivier to walk. Her legs failed her when she tried to take another step, and Zinnia had to carry her. The little strength she had built up in those last months came in handy now as she lifted Olivier from the floor and carried her to the showers, to the same tub where once Zinnia had almost been carried, too.

And it was so easy to let go, to just let Zinnia handle her. Olivier had no will left to do anything, no strength. She had wasted it all standing strong for everyone to see, and now that she needed to hold her own ground, she wasn’t able to.

Chapter End Notes

It's funny, because last year I was a day away from posting my first Adversity chapter. I'd finished around five chapters at the time and I was a little hesitant about posting the fic in general, and now it's just ... such a big part of my life, so much bigger than I would have been able to anticipate, even if it's been a month and a half since I officially finished it. (I miss my girls so much I'm probably going to be writing silly oneshots about them until the day I die)
He had known war was close, but Drachma sending such obvious spies in this very moment was nothing but anticlimactic. He didn’t even enjoy the fight, physical as it was, or the banter that followed it as he tied the intruders up and led them to the fort where justice would await them. He was more than looking forward to seeing Olivier’s face when she realized what he had just caught in the path to Briggs.

The two punks mumbled to themselves and to one another all the way, and Buccaneer shushed them as loudly as he could. He was boss here, and that would be made clear from the first moment. Otherwise he’d have two slippery spies, and that couldn’t be good for business. Buccaneer tried to listen in from time to time as they walked the path. It didn’t seem like the spies were talking in Drachman, which was all the more bizarre to him, but it wasn’t his duty to judge. All he had to do was walk into the fort with them, and hand them over for Olivier to handle. She would know what to do, she always did.

He knocked at her door, proud as a father, and puffed up his chest.

When he was allowed entrance, he smirked and said:

“Brought you some scum, boss.”

Both Olivier and Zinnia, who was keeping her company in Miles’s absence, looked up in perplexity at him. Not only it was a rare thing for him to knock, the two silhouettes standing right next to him in ropes were the most unfamiliar thing. They didn’t look Drachman, they must have been really good spies.

Zinnia looked at them, then at Olivier, biting her lip.

“Should I go?”

“One,” Olivier said firmly. “It’s fine. They’ve been apprehended. Can’t go anywhere now, can they?”

The punk in the red coat, his built alarmingly smaller than the other man, who stood in full shining armor, pouted visibly.

Buccaneer pushed the two of them in without minding his strength, and Olivier could confirm her suspicions of espionage when she could get a closer look at the armor, huge in height and width, one of Drachma’s new weapons, no doubt.

“They were going around the back to catch us unguarded.” Buccaneer chuckled at the thought that he had just managed a capture, proving himself worthy after so long trapped in the fort or in a cave, starving to death and losing his fight to boredom.
Olivier wisely ignored him in favor of addressing the spies. She remembered the one before them, buried six feet under because she hadn’t known how to be lenient enough that she would have gotten any information. She had learned her lesson and planned to change strategies this time around.

“Who are you?” Olivier asked calmly, as if none of this had anything to do with her and she wasn’t facing a potential threat. These two might as well be Drachma’s way to distract Briggs while they prepared an attack.

“I’m the Fullmetal Alchemist. My name’s Edward Elric. And he’s my brother, Al,” the kid in the red coat said. “Major Armstrong from Central Command sent us here to meet with the general in charge of this post. Is that you?” he asked after a beat.

Olivier scowled but said nothing.

“Can you call off your dog?” the kid said. “All of this really isn’t necessary, we’re on the same side.”

She held his intense gaze for a couple of seconds, trying to get a general idea of who he was and what he wanted, but eventually she just turned to Buccaneer.

“Have they been searched?”

Buccaneer’s jaw dropped. He looked ashamed. “Er—no.”

“Well,” she said, her voice strained, “do so now.”

Buccaneer nodded and set off to the task he’d been ordered to do, not careful at all as he dunked his hand in Ed’s pockets.

“But I’m with the military!” the kid complained, his brother standing completely quiet as Buccaneer opened the visor of his headpiece and gasped.

“Sure, but how do I verify that?” Olivier said, raising an eyebrow. “Anyone can claim to be somebody famous.”

“Boss,” Buccaneer stammered, holding Al’s headpiece in his hand. “He’s … hollow.”

Slowly, she turned to pay attention to that detail and found out that, indeed, the armor was completely and absolutely empty. But I have seen it move… How?

She couldn’t allow herself to show any astonishment whatsoever, so she pushed her hair back, showing her temple scar, and crossed her arms, tapping her fingers on her elbow.

“I can see that.”

Buccaneer searched the two alleged spies again, more thoroughly this time, aware that he had his commander’s eyes right on the back of his neck. This time he made sure to look beneath the clothes of the kid, and lucky him, he found something this time.

Thin and yellowy, the envelop Buccaneer held in his hands didn’t look in any way suspicious, and that was why he suspected of it immediately.

He gave it to Olivier. She took it and observed it quietly. It had been stamped with a rose, and she recognized what it meant at once. Her face sunk into another one of her frowns. She had no idea how long it had been since she had last been in contact with him, but she could guess it was a little less than two decades, since she’d left. And then… when the worst had happened, she had decided
never to think of him again. And she had tried to, and failed to, understandably. Now, after god knew how long, he was sending her this? To what end?

*For my sister, from Alex,* the back of the envelop read.

Before she could add anything, the armor spoke in a slightly canned voice:

“It’s a letter of introduction from Major Alex Louis Armstrong. If you read that, then you’ll know you can trust us.”

Zinnia, who until now had been quiet, sitting demurely on Olivier’s lap, couldn’t keep her mouth closed for much longer. Did these two boys, then, come from Central instead of Drachma? Or were they perhaps lying, distracting them? Things had been very detached between Central and Briggs lately, in the fort no one had any clue what was going on down south, so having them send two renegades this time of the year was nothing but suspicious, even more so if it all appeared to be in order. Why would Alex Armstrong go out of his way, deep into secrecy, in order to contact his sister? As far as Zinnia knew, they hadn’t talked in a very long time and Olivier had had no interest in letting him try.

It came as no surprise when, after a moment of thought, she watched Olivier tear the letter into tiny little pieces, still maintaining eye contact with the two strangers.

Zinnia’s jaw dropped even more. What was Olivier doing? She could have imagined Olivier distrusting the information, but destroying it was a new level even for her. She didn’t understand, Olivier had always spoken not precisely well of her brother, and she might have her reasons for doing so, but it was still cruel to deliberately ignore all intents on his part to make contact and perhaps pass on important information.

Olivier stared at the pieces of the letter, now scattered over her desk and floor as well as her uniform. She wasn’t going to let Alex back into her life like nothing had happened. He had done the one thing she couldn’t and wouldn’t forgive him for, and he’d be allowed no mercy in this anymore. He had been pampered enough by their mother, long ago, and perhaps still. Olivier found herself wishing she knew what the situation at her old home was, so she could roast Alex more in depth.

She was momentarily required to pay attention to the scene again when Ed squealed like a pig ready for slaughter at the sight of his introduction letter having been torn apart.

“Aren’t you even going to read it?!”

In that very moment, Zinnia stood up from Olivier’s lap and made her way to the door. Buccaneer tugged at the rope around both boys to let her through, and he watched her disappear into the corridors, as perplex about why she had left as Olivier herself.

She composed herself as if nothing had happened, regardless.

“What for? I have you here now. I’ll judge you accordingly to what my two eyes see, not what my brother would think of such individuals as yourselves.”

“Well, then, what’s the judgment?” Ed asked right away, challenging her.

She stared at him, impassive. He was obviously a kid, too young to be under Drachma’s orders, and his brother… there was a consciousness inside that armor, all right, and Olivier could only guess that there was alchemy involved in that. She didn’t know if that armor could feel the cold, or tiredness, but she was acutely aware of the slight tremors going through the other boy.
She thought of putting them away at once, try to get some information out of them by force, but she didn’t think it necessary. Besides, the last time she had done such a thing she had let all the information escape before she’d realized she should have held back. She couldn’t do the same thing now.

“Come with me,” she just told them, ignoring Ed’s question. She faced the boy’s eyes again. “Quick staring like an idiot and start walking. Be warned, I won’t coddle you because you’re children, even if I am giving you medical attention.”

The boy’s face seemed to relax a little at that. It was the least she could do, let the doctor take a look at them and then put them in a warm cell until she had a plan.

Buccaneer stayed still, she grabbed at his sleeve on the way out.

“You too.”

The doctor had plenty to say about the boy in red. He found out, much to his pleasure, that the boy had two automail limbs, and had been quick to mention to him that if he didn’t get them updated to the northern temperatures, he would probably die. Still, he had said so with a smile on his face. He hadn’t seen automail this refined since Buccaneer’s first prototype of an arm, nothing like the multiuse one he now sported. This automail was clearly from the south, and he took his time examining it as well as his patient.

Al, on the other hand, he hadn’t been able to examine anyway. His head had been returned, much to Buccaneer’s dismay, who stared at the armor in disbelief and grumpiness, and now he sat demurely in a corner of the room as his brother finally started doing what he most enjoyed in the world: complaining.

Olivier had taken a seat by the desk and watched intently, arms crossed and brow furrowed. She was amused to some extent by the single-handed bickering Ed was sprouting out of his mouth. He was small and angry, and found plenty of improvable things in his situation. She could have made that situation much worse, and would soon do so when they’d managed to adapt his automail to the north. She’d never seen it done before, she could benefit from that information as well. One never knew when it would come in handy.

“If you’ve a problem, now’s the time to speak up.”

Ed glared at her with an intensity unknown to most men.

“Yeah, lady—“

“—don’t call her lady, boy, you’ll regret it—” Buccaneer muttered, but Ed didn’t correct himself.

“—I do have a problem. Several, might I add. I come here with an official letter of introduction, down the right fucking path to your little wall, and I get searched at the entrance like a fucking criminal? What kind of place this is?”

Buccaneer, who had been searching again through the clothes of the boy, grabbed the pocket watch he had seen earlier and hadn’t paid much attention to. Holding it up, he swirled it in his hands repeatedly and noticed the engraving with the banner of the military.

“Quit that,” Olivier told him, ignoring Ed. “Give it back. I believe he’s told us the truth and he’s
military.”

“You mean this kid is the equivalent of a major?” Buccaneer spat. “He’s not extorting us or anything?”

When Olivier shook her head, Buccaneer mumbled something under his breath but returned the watch on command. Olivier changed postures on the seat to spread her legs comfortably.

“So it is also true that you’re an acquaintance of my brother…” she trailed off. She couldn’t say she hadn’t thought of Alex recently. It was a faded thought in her head, the remembrance of the boy he had been and the man he had regrettably grown to be. She remembered well, she just didn’t want to. “How is he?”

Olivier turned her head a little to the side to hide her expression, surely softer than she’d normally allow, and saw the picture the doctor kept on his desk. A simple and framed picture of people that he bore resemblance to, including a little girl with his same hair color that must have been his child. His… family.

The word punctured her mind. She had none now. Her parents and younger sisters were and had always, in a way, been strangers to her, and she’d always been closer to her brother, who she hadn’t spoken to or of in a very long time. How did she measure the weight of a family if she didn’t feel she had one? If she hadn’t felt like she belonged to the Armstrong bloodline in decades? If anything, Briggs and its men were her home and family now, but the relationship was so different. She wasn’t their mother, but she was their superior, and that always made for difficult waters to navigate. Emotions weren’t allowed, and she couldn’t let go of duty to play housewives with the men.

*What family do I have now, if my own is better off lost to me and the one I found is something I can’t have?* she wondered quietly, setting the picture back on the desk. If the doctor had a child, he probably had a wife too. Would he miss her? She tried to imagine what it would be, to miss those who were far, but she had no answer to give herself. She had, for all purposes, been the one to get away—and the one person who had been willing to wait, Olivier hadn’t allowed to. It came to her now, though, that the meaning of family was more scattered than just bloodlines or powerful binds with people. it also meant companionship on equal terms. And she did have one person in her life that fit that mold. Zinnia did, and she also did just happen to have bolted out of the room, to have left her. Why had she left?

Olivier sighed and Al’s answer brought her back to the real world, where she had a little mystery to solve on her own.

“The major is—he’s doing fine. He seemed happy to talk about you.”

Her face wrinkled in a terrifying grimace, the face of the bitterest part of winter. *He should never have the right to talk about me ever again. He shouldn’t keep finding ways to make it into my life. First into memories, now with this stupid letter and these stupider boys.*

“Never mind him,” Olivier said. “Tell me everything you’ve left out till now. I want to know it all, including why your armor is empty,” she finished, looking at Al.

“Actually, that’s something we don’t like to talk about,” Ed pointed out, his sass and anger diminished for now.

Buccaneer chuckled so loudly Al and Ed gave a little start. “He thinks he can actually say that to us?”
Olivier shushed him violently

The doctor washed his hands and dried them on a cloth, patiently, and moved from Ed, who now began to get dressed, to Buccaneer’s bare torso and his slightly scratched automail.

“Here’s the thing, kid. Here up in Briggs we all have plenty to hide,” he said. “And, as you can imagine, no one likes to talk about it. But if a general of the army comes up to you and asks—I don’t know, I’m pretty sure I would spit it out quick.”

Ed’s face got all red, and not precisely from shame.

“But … if this information reaches the wrong ears, I could be court-martialed.”

Olivier scoffed. She couldn’t believe this boy was scared of that, as if that was the greatest danger and offense this world could spring out on a member of the military. If Ed knew how many things she had done, without her superiors knowing…

“Even I have secrets like that.” Olivier said. This conversation was an exchange of information, giving and taking until both parties got what they wanted. Or until she got what she wanted. And she wasn’t going to stop any time soon.”

Something in her tone warned Al that he really was dealing with someone important and powerful, capable of unspeakable things that she hadn’t, in fact, spoken of.

“Brother, listen,” he whispered to Ed. “I really think we have to tell her.”

“I don’t know, Al. I don’t trust her,” Ed whispered back, as subtly as he could.

Olivier saw right through it.

“What the fuck are you gossiping about? Start talking now or you’ll spend the night outdoors.”

Her eyes burned like coal embers, and their furious heat made their way to their stances. They melted like icicles in the summer sun. At first, Ed seemed determined to hold her gaze and not let her win, but he didn’t know who he was dealing with, and soon he looked down, defeated.

A few seconds after, in a distinct mutter, he began to tell her about transmutation, about their journey to Central, and about their quest north. And about… alkahestry.

Olivier’s whole face went white, her expression changing from angered to livid. Buccaneer could almost not recognize her in the moment or two that this lasted. Then, she blinked her reaction away and was able to say something coherently:

“Have you just said alkahestry?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Al said, not very sure as to why this mattered.

Buccaneer grumbled again:

“You’ll address the general as ‘sir’, boy.”

“Yes, sir,” Al corrected at once, trying to be more lenient than his brother was. “This girl we’re looking for comes from Xing, and she’s an expert on the matter.”

“So that’s why you’re looking for her? Because her services might be useful against Central?” Olivier dared to guess. “I understand you have a purpose here, and permission to have travelled so
The two boys began talking excitedly at this, thinking that she finally had understood it, but she interrupted. “I’m not done. Whatever your situation may be, I don’t want people like you in my fort, coming in without a warning and with those manners. Honestly… How could the people at Central let these two run around loose?”

Buccaneer chuckled. “Heh, we know why…”

Olivier fulminated him with her gaze, then turned back to the boys.

“I’d like to tell you to get the hell out of here before I’m done saying the last word. There are no children allowed in Briggs. But…” She looked at them cleanly now, no anger, no resentment or even curiosity. Just… tiredness and a bit of determination. “I am interested in alkahestry.”

More than just that. Hadn’t she just spent the entire year looking for a clue that might lead her to the secrets of alkahestry? Hadn’t she made calls, asked for favors? And now, when she had given up the search, when she’d grown to believe she’d never find a lead, there it was… right in front of her, right in her reach, after months. She just had to make an alliance with these idiots from Central, all in the middle of a war. It was that simple, and that complicated. But how would she acquire the knowledge she’d so coveted?

An idea lit up in her mind like a lamp in the middle of a foggy day.

“You know this girl from Xing? You’ve met her before?”

Before anything, Olivier needed to make sure this girl existed and could be talked to. Otherwise, her whole plan would fall apart.

The kids nodded in answer to her question.

“And you’re sure she knows alkahestry well enough to teach it to, say, us?”

Ed nodded again, but Al was faster in comprehending what the general was after.

“Wait a second, alkahestry is specialized for medical purposes. You can’t just—”

“You can never know too much,” Olivier interrupted again, unstoppable. “Especially here in the north, where we’re right next to Drachma.” She didn’t think it appropriate to add anything else about the war, when they probably didn’t even know what it meant that they were so close to the border with Drachma. She didn’t dare mention the war, in case they understood how fast it could and would build up to knock on their door. She needed to find this alkahestry girl fast, she might be the last resource to help Olivier in that war. “If we use it right, alkahestry could make an excellent weapon.”

Al tried again: “But I’m sure there’s plenty of actual weapons to use against Drachma—”

“You Central men are nothing but lapdogs living safely within your city walls,” Olivier said at once, spitting the words as if they were bullets. She had lost men in this war, before its start, and that anger didn’t go without a loud boom. “But we are the ones who protect you. Our job is far more perilous than yours. I will make use of any knowledge that I can get my hands on, regardless of whether it is an actual weapon or not.” I will protect them all this time… Finally, she took a deep breath and finished what she wanted to say: “Leave the task of finding that alkahestry girl to me. You two will stay here inside the fort until I am done with her. We’ll put you to work while we’re at it. We need the numbers.” She looked to them. “I’ll send someone down here to show you around.”

Buccaneer smirked remembering the last time and how it had gone down with Zinnia, how she’d been treated differently from day one. Right now Olivier would be giving these two boys a very
different treatment, and Buccaneer could only imagine the kind of bunk someone would be ordered to clean for them. Probably one of the worst.

Olivier waited until Buccaneer was done with the doctor and exited the room with him as he left to rejoin his patrol. He noticed she was especially quiet, but he was proud inside still and had to fight the urge to tell her how nice a service he had done by bringing those boys in. He didn’t, though. He knew better than to do it.

“Those boys haven’t exactly had it easy, have they?” he said. “Aren’t we… being too harsh on them?”

“Even if they have witnessed some carnage in their time, on the inside they remain soft and weak, nothing we can use in the fort even if we wanted to. And, what’s more, they know something they aren’t telling us.”

When they reached the stairs, she meant to go up instead of continuing through the corridors with Buccaneer towards the gates.

“You’re not going back to the office?” he asked, puzzled.

“I’ve something I need to do,” she just said. “Later, soldier.”

“Later, yeah…”

He stood there for a second, watching her climb the steps of the stairs and wondering what the hell was more important than find these boys a bunk and a job.

She hadn’t had any contact with her writings in a long time, since that day she’d been about to leave and had been stopped. Occasionally, she’d dropped a paragraph or two on Olivier’s table, but she’d stopped writing once she’d started talking. Of course, she omitted things she would have written if things were different but that she couldn’t say out loud to Olivier.

Much to her surprise, none of her words were too bad that she had to stop reading. But, all things considered, her mind wasn’t in on it as to actually discern whether what she was reading was good or just cheesy.

Zinnia read but her mind couldn’t catch up with the interwoven words. All she saw, all she remembered was that letter, who it was from and for, and how its tiny little pieces had covered the floor and the desk.

She didn’t understand why she was so fixated on that, it wasn’t any of her business, Alex wasn’t her brother. But he was family to her family, and defending him had felt like the right thing to do. He might be a soldier, an alchemist, and a man, but Zinnia couldn’t judge him. She could judge his sister instead.

When the door to the room opened to reveal her, Zinnia didn’t even look up. She’d read the same line about golden hair more worthy to her that actual gold at least four times.

Olivier stared at her for a moment, then closed the door and went back to observing quietly, unsure of what to make of this.

Seeing as Zinnia wasn’t paying her any attention, Olivier cleared her throat first.
“What happened to you earlier?” Olivier asked casually. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Zinnia replied coldly. “It’s not me you should be worrying about.”

Olivier sighed, exasperated. She had no time to play games now, if she had offended Zinnia she wanted to know why so she would have a shot at fixing it.

“Meaning?” she asked.

Finally, Zinnia’s eyes left the paper to dig themselves into Olivier’s as she slammed it on the bed.

“Meaning,” she said, unable to believe Olivier right now, “your brother, Olivier. Why would you destroy his letter?”

“He doesn’t deserve my respect.” It was, after all, the simplest answer Olivier could give.

“Excuse me? Why?” Zinnia remembered now, Olivier telling her that Alex had quit at Ishval, that he’d left his companions and his country behind only to save his sorry ass from the one thing joining the army promised you. “Because he didn’t fight the whole war through? That’s cruel!”

Olivier chuckled dryly. “That’s what wars are like. If you’re given an order, you’re expected to follow through till the end, no matter the personal cost.”

“They were killing innocent people,” Zinnia said. She’d thought it obvious, but she was seeing now that Olivier didn’t see casualties, she just saw a war that the military had won, a war his brother had abandoned without fighting. She didn’t see the blood on the roads and the empty towns, she didn’t see the dust and sand in the air being the only sound that could be heard once the guns had stopped firing. Olivier’s eyes didn’t pick up on those details, only on what ammo had been used, what battalions had brought victory, what they’d gone there to do, and the endgame of the war itself. Zinnia, instead, saw dead people by the thousands and exile to the survivors—Zinnia saw the decadence the military had failed to. “He was killing innocent people he knew had done nothing to wrong the country or the military. And yet you, who didn’t have anything to do with that, safe up in your fucking wall, you who can live without that guilt, get to have a say on how deserting is cowardly and wrong and how it makes your brother lesser than? I don’t think so.”

Olivier was calm, she didn’t jump to any conclusions, analyzing slowly every word Zinnia had said and every possible reason she might have to say them. As far as Olivier knew, Zinnia had had no involvement with the Ishval conflict, least of all with Alex, so then why had she gotten this upset, as upset as if it were … personal?

“You had somebody who fought in that war, didn’t you?”

“You’re trying to rationalize my response, but sorry to tell you that no, this is just me having a minimum of empathy,” Zinnia said. “That war was wrong. And most people fighting it knew that. If they’d had more soldiers like your brother, willing to prioritize human lives over simple ruthless orders, then maybe that war wouldn’t have lasted. Have you thought about that?”

“That’s how it works. That’s not how any of it works,” Olivier said, starting to get a little impatient. Now she understood even less than before. “He should’ve been expelled from the forces, not rewarded with his current post. He brought dishonor to our family, he—”

“I don’t care,” Zinnia simply said. “It was the humane thing to do, the right thing to do. How can you have lost all respect for him? How can he still respect you after that?” She laughed frivolously. “You’re the one that’s dishonoring your own family, can’t you see that?”
And all Olivier could think was: haven’t I always? Always the black sheep in the family, the tall unladylike dyke that couldn’t come out of the closet, the serious and cold-hearted soldier that would never have a family, who had fled from her biological one. Always dishonoring everyone who knew her, always standing in the shade of someone people always loved best.

And now she was dishonoring Zinnia too. Because the look she was giving her was nothing but telling of how little Zinnia wanted to trust her right now.

_The black sheep in the family, the tall unladylike dyke, the serious and cold-hearted soldier... I will be nothing but._

With a furious glare, Olivier tipped her chin up.

“You choose now to be angry at me for things that don’t matter, right when I need you the most.” And the worst part of saying that out loud wasn’t the anger, Olivier knew very well how to swallow that together with her pride. No, the worst part was the feeling of loneliness. Something was coming at her, at her beloved fort, with all the strength in the world and faster than anyone knew, and Olivier was alone against it. Even more so than ever, because the person she loved the most now refused to be there with her.

It was so alienating she could almost feel tears pooling in her eyes.

Zinnia returned her glare, refusing to look away. Perhaps things had gotten out of hand enough for Zinnia to hold her gaze longer than ever, perhaps Olivier had lost.

“I don’t give a _shit_ that you need me right now,” Zinnia said, picking her things from the bed and getting up. “Your brother must have needed you, too.”

She was out of the room before Olivier could register that she was physically alone now, too. That she would be spending the night alone once more.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve used the English dub for some dialogues which have been reproduced from this chapter on. Others have been changed (mostly to make them more dramatic XD), although their meaning remains the same. It’s all mostly canon with slight diversions and additions, nothing too big to note (yet). When something big changes, you will know as soon as you read it, trust me :3

(also, I haven’t said anything about this before, but … I am very aware of the many typos there are and I’m deeply sorry about them, but I’m just too self-conscious to do a fifth general reread to correct them and/or get a beta. Maybe in the future when I’ve distanced myself enough from the story, I’ll go full editor on it XD)
“What’s wrong, kiddo? You look like you need a drink.”

Austin yawned.

“I don’t need a drink. I need a nap.”

“Night watch again?”

“Youth equals less hours of sleep. I’ve learned to live with it.” He yawned again, stretching his arms over his head. After, he tried to sit straight on the bench but Zinnia watched him slowly slide over the table. “Did you hear about the new Central recruits?”

It took her a second to realize what he meant.

“The kids?” Zinnia said. “Yeah, I was there when Buccaneer dragged them in.”

“Did you join the bet saying they’re Drachma spies in hiding?”

Zinnia gave him a stern look.

“The small one can’t be more than fifteen,” she said.

Austin shrugged.

“Drachma has no scruples.”

“Olivier has no scruples…”

“You fight fire with fire, I guess,” Austin said, drinking from the glass in front of him. “But in your favor I’ll say they really don’t look like spies. I mean, who in their right minds would send a kid on a mission?”

“They said they come from Central with a letter of introduction from the general’s brother.”

“And you believed it?” Austin said, suspicious.

“What else could it be?” Zinnia said. “I came here like that, too. I could’ve been anyone, too.”

“You weren’t, though,” Austin said. His neutral expression softly melted into a silly smile. “Just a very, very bad cook.”

She hit him in the upper arm over the table.
“I just think she’s overdoing it,” she said. “I get it, it’s war and everything, but they’re just kids.”

“One of them’s wearing a bigass armor,” he noted.

“They’re kids, Austin. She’s overdoing it,” Zinnia repeated. Yesterday she had seen a side of Olivier she didn’t know existed before, or she hadn’t been willing to see, and the truth weighted heavy on her. Even if she had suspected for a long time that Olivier really did live up to people’s expectations of her, harsh as some were. “Her brother sent them, that should be enough for her.”

“The north doesn’t trust easily,” Austin said, but he was too young and too different to be saying that, Zinnia was sorry to hear it. “It’s the law of Briggs.”

She scoffed and put down her glass a little too hard. *Here only the strong survive*, she thought. *But that’s always been propagandistic military bullshit.*

“I wonder what exactly about *shunning* a direct family member for no reason counts as strength…”

Austin shrugged.

“Buccaneer’s always saying that Olivier must have beef with her brother because she’s always acted like he didn’t exist. Some people from Central—newbies, mostly—have been known to ask her if she’s the sister of the deserter of Ishval. Didn’t end well for them.”

Zinnia made no comment, just kept eating, but she was getting red in the face from anger.

“Something wrong?” Austin said. “Did it go down the wrong pipe?”

Zinnia took her drink and finished it in one gulp, then wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

She wondered if she should say anything, or if Olivier would definitely want to send her away if she divulged private matters to Austin. But Austin had been closest to her during those days Olivier and company had been gone, and Zinnia knew he was a good lad, he would understand.

“I’m pissed at her for ignoring her brother,” she finally said, trying not to get angry in Austin’s presence because he didn’t deserve to be burdened with it. Olivier should be. “I understand desertion is pretty bad but…”

Austin nodded enthusiastically.

“During times of war, it usually leads to death if you’re caught,” he said, almost reciting it. “Major Armstrong was lucky because he didn’t exactly leave, he just refused to do his duty, and his superior sent him away. Plus, people were lenient with him after because he was an alchemist more than a soldier. Otherwise, he probably would’ve ended up in jail or worse. He still gets called the deserter of Ishval, though. Stuff like that sticks.” Austin paused and scratched his chin. “I’ve heard he’s a nice man.”

“Nothing like our Ice Queen, huh?” Zinnia muttered under her breath.

“Pretty much, yeah. But you need to understand her mentality. I don’t know how I would’ve reacted if my own brother had left the most important war in Amestrian territory.”

“I do,” Zinnia said. “I would’ve understood.”

“It’s more complicated than just understanding, I’m sure she’s thought about it for years,” he said. “But at the end of the day she’s a major general. She can’t afford to forgive him for leaving.”
“I don’t think she should straight up forgive him and go play kitchen with him like they were kids, but maybe she should think about letting herself have a relationship with him. For the sake of normalcy.”

At the end of the day, Zinnia couldn’t put it past her that Olivier had severed up the relationship with her brother. With her family at large, it was more than obvious why she would, but up until now Zinnia had known of no reason aside from this one that would make Olivier hate her brother.

“I guess,” Austin said. “I don’t know what else to say, honestly. It’s not any of my business.”

“That’s the problem, Austin, that it is my business. Because I’m with her. That war was bloody and merciless and her brother stepped out of it. I’d celebrate that, not punish it.”

Austin mumbled:

“They say the major left because he refused to kill more innocent people.”

“You’re only making me think I’m more right than I thought!”

“I’m not going to tell you how you should think,” he said, then he smiled at her and elbowed her. “Mostly because you’d eat me alive.”

“Damn right I would.”

“But you should talk to her about this.”

Zinnia crossed her arms and pouted.

“I’m not in the mood to be on speaking terms with her just yet—”

A noise interrupted her. It wasn’t anything Zinnia was used to hearing in the fort, nothing like the soft clack of feet against the concrete or the muffled rumbling of the pipes or the slam of a door closing. This was shrill and loud and all-encompassing.

Austin got to his feet at once, eyeing her intently as she stayed where she was.

“What are you doing?” he told her. “Come on.”

“What?” she said.

“It’s the alarm, something’s up. We need to move.”

When he noticed her confusion, he literally grabbed her by the wrist and tugged at her to get going. She did, following him blindly through the corridors, where more and more people were starting to move in all directions, shouting to one another something about the lower levels.

“What’s going on?” she kept trying to ask, but it was as if no one saw her. As if no one heard anything but the alarm.

“I received warning that we’ll be having visitors this week,” Miles said.

Olivier sat straighter on her chair. The word ‘visitor’ wasn’t something she was accustomed to hearing. Zinnia had been the first and the last in a long time, and now, of course, it had been a while
since Olivier had thought of her as a visitor per se. The thought of housing someone else, especially during this time of year, turned sour in her mouth.

“Visitors?” she said icily. “In the dead of winter?”

“Yes, sir, the Crimson Alchemist and Lieutenant General Raven,” Miles said.

Olivier’s eyes opened wide.

“Crimson…”

“Yes,” he said, “the alchemist who massacred thousands of people at Ishval after your brother—”

“I’d forgotten,” she mumbled, not paying attention to the details he was reminding her of. She had something else in mind entirely. “Kimblee, the Crimson Alchemist. Crimson. Didn’t the Drachman mention something about crimson?”

“They did, sir,” Buccaneer said, clearing his throat.

“It was a rhetorical question,” Miles whispered into Buccaneer’s ear. Then he turned to Olivier: “Mr Kimblee suffered an attack a few miles south of here, he has requested the aid of the fort in order to find his … assailant.”

She hmphed.

“And he’s coming here to procure it, isn’t he?”

Miles nodded.

The door to her office was pushed open with violence and interrupted whatever thought Miles was thinking of voicing. One of the soldiers popped out into the room, red in the face and sweating as if he’d run up the stairs at top speed.

“General, sir, you need to come immediately,” he panted. “We have an intruder in the lower levels.”

Right that very second, the alarm was sounded.

“We what?” she spat. The day could not get any worse, or so she’d thought. Now it just had.

A monstrosity from the underground, pale, tall enough that his head reached two levels higher than the ground, and so broad he outdid the pillars of the fort.

Zinnia had seen it move with her two own eyes and yet still couldn’t believe he wasn’t an animatronic, something the human hand had crafted to star in a fair. He walked painfully slowly, boots hard against the floors, making everything shake with every step he took. Whatever he touched, he bent or pushed away, but he seemed to mean to do nothing but tour circles around the room, mumbling.

“What is that thing?” Austin said under his breath, right next to her. A bunch of soldiers had gathered on the top of one of the levels, hands gripping the handrails as they leaned forward to take a better look instead of going down and doing something. There were dents on the floor that the creature had made by walking, and boxes had been crushed to dust under his feet as well. Everywhere he moved, disaster sprouted out. And people ran downstairs, trying to steer clear from the monster’s path, but
they never went too far.

“Don’t know,” Zinnia muttered back. “Let’s get out of here, we need to help.”

Austin didn’t move.

“How can we help?” he said. “Look closely. There’s nothing we can do.”

“We can’t just stay here watching. Someone might get killed down there.” And as soon as she said it she knew how true that could potentially be.

Someone laughed in the crowd.

“Look at those two, running away from it…”

Zinnia noticed the kids were indeed running, but not away per se. They cycled the creature, tried to stop him with alchemy, although it didn’t seem to be working. She held the handrail tighter. She needed to get down there to help now.

She didn’t even think of how she should be even able to help. What could she have done, alone against such a monster? But she had to try to at least try to get the kids out of there, even if by the looks of it they were the ones slowing the monster down more than anyone else. Briggs either ran to get a better look of it or was already ogling safely.

Frowning, Zinnia let go of the handrail and walked decidedly towards the stairs.

Something hard and smooth bumped into her, and then a pair of hands tightened around her wrists.

“Mrs Erwin, you need to get out here now.”

It was Miles.

She fought him on a hunch, trying to get away from him, trying to go downstairs. If he was here, that meant he’d been sent.

To keep me away, to keep me safe, she thought. To hell with safe, Olivier.

“We need help, I need to—”

“You need to stay away from here,” he said calmly. “I have orders to get you upstairs, where you’ll be safe.”

To hell with safe!

Zinnia yanked herself free from his grip.

“People are being called to this place and you’re going to drive me away from it?”

She stared at him until he had to look away, speaking words that now had no real meaning to her if he hadn’t been able to defend them before saying them.

“General Armstrong has given explicit orders to—”

“Olivier can say shit,” Zinnia spat. “I’ll do what I want.”

“You will not,” Miles said calmly. He looked her in the eye, red against brown, a second time. She
hoped he didn’t plan on convincing her this way. However red his eyes were, she wouldn’t fear them enough to look away. “Please.”

Zinnia’s eyes wandered downstairs once more to the chaos and the children running away from a towering monster. Her feet began ascending the stairs as Miles followed. She could hear the screams and the stomps of the monster on the floors, she could almost feel the destruction coming to every level of Briggs.

*And what could you do to stop it?* she asked herself.

She looked up at Miles, trying to still win this. Still trying to be right, despite what her heart was telling her.

“What about the rest of the men?” she asked. The men that had been watching or running away. Would they be forced into battle if it came to it? How else could Briggs hope to stop this menace before it was too late?

“They have a duty to uphold.”

*Olivier, you mad woman…* Zinnia thought. *You send me a bodyguard and send everyone else to risk their lives. You mad, mad woman.*

She faced Miles one last time, out of the blue. If he answered her the way she expected him to, she wouldn’t oppose to staying here for the duration of this fight. To do what she was expected to do.

*To run, Zinnia thought. Away like a coward. Like me.*

“What is she?” she only asked.

“Getting ready to deal with this.”

She nodded. Miles had always been a straight-forward man who didn’t like elaborate secrets unless they were his own.

“Make sure she’s safe, then,” Zinnia told him as she got away, climbing more and more steps towards a new floor. “Do me this favor and treat that like an order from me.”

*Here’s a taste of your own medicine, general,* she thought.

He smiled, despite the fact that he could never take it as an order, and left the same way he’d come, leaving her alone watching over what was, all details aside, a battlefield proper.

A battlefield that for now was silent, as the monster had finally stopped moving and was facing… the two kids.

“What the hell is going on here?” Zinnia mumbled under her breath, posted again on a handrail. Was there any relation between the kids and the monster? Could they really be coming from Drachma to infiltrate Briggs and overthrow Olivier? Two kids and a creature like this… They might have the resources to win. But, even so, Zinnia couldn’t fully believe that the allegiance of two kids rested on the creature, it was impossible. She leaned closer on the handrail, trying to catch a glimpse of their faces, but she was too high up.

What she did see and hear, though, was the shot. Loud and clear, it ricocheted against the monster and met its end at a metal wall. She also heard Buccaneer’s yell after and her throat closed up in anticipation when the monster moved to pick up a fallen pillar.
“Watch out!” she screamed from above.

The two kids turned to look at where the scream had come from just in time and could see what the monster was up to. They moved in time and Zinnia breathed easy.

For a moment, anyway.

When the creature began to move again, Zinnia heard an order to open fire on it, and she had to cover her ears so the echo of the shots wouldn’t momentarily deafen her. She closed her eyes as well just from the sound of it, as if someone was trying to shoot through something so solid nothing could mar its surface. She opened them again only to find that the monster’s skin was impenetrable. To her surprise, he was still standing, still moving.

Moving and moving until it reached the elevator and pushed just the right button.

“That bastard’s going up to Development!” Buccaneer growled from below, running frantically towards the stairs. Zinnia hesitated whether to climb up or stay where she was. She didn’t have a clue what she could do to help even if she had the instinct for it, but staying here doing nothing except watch the show felt like cowardice. And Briggs would have none of that.

In the end, she went down a couple of floors, just to see it all better, to try and gather enough information that could be useful later. Because, eventually, this would have to be reported to the higher authorities and solutions would have to be come to.

To hell with safe, she thought again. Briggs wasn’t safe, it had never been nor pretended to be. It was a labyrinth ruled by a woman with an iron will and inhabited by men as hard as stone. Zinnia would have hardly thought Briggs had the potential to be anyone’s home if she hadn’t learned to see into its heart.

None of this was safe. Now it was even less so.

And from there, closer to the action and the danger that made her heart speed up, Zinnia didn’t miss anything.

The door to Development opened with a thud, and a collective gasp went through everywhere when they saw what was walking out of the elevator.

Then, a voice Zinnia would have known everywhere rose among everything, although she couldn’t confirm that it was indeed Olivier’s until the smoke coming out of her huge weapon had dissipated:

“Don’t move!”

In the blink of an eye, an explosion of fire emerged from the gun straight at the chest of the creature, and no matter for how long it burned on, the creature remained standing, breathing, alive.

The smoke concealed him for some seconds, and Zinnia could have easily believed—hoped—that this was the end and that Olivier, holding that huge gun that in other circumstances would have made Zinnia swoon, had finally killed the beast. But in the end the fire was gone and the beast had withstood it.

A grunt echoed up the walls.

“I know that I fucking hit it,” Olivier said.

At level ground, Buccaneer yelled:
“It’s no use, firearms don’t work against it.”

Olivier grunted again, thinking quickly.

“Withdraw all noncombatants immediately,” she said, giving her gun to one of her subordinates. “And turn off the alarm before the sound reaches the Drachman and they use the opportunity against us.”

Zinnia thought she looked about ready to leave, not defeated but determined to change strategy if striking that directly hadn’t worked, when something came out of the sealed rooms in Development. Zinnia had heard rumors during her stay about what kind of things Development cooked up for the general and the fort, and she’d always imagined the most luxurious weapons, finer in everything one could imagine. When one of the doors opened up to reveal three shining tanks, her jaw dropped.

And when Olivier stopped to talk to the man atop one of them and then proceeded to climb inside, Zinnia perceived it as if it were happening in slow motion, and it might as well have. She wondered for a brief moment how it could even be possible for a human being to move so fluidly.

*She is no saint,* her own brain reminded itself. *She tore that letter like it was nothing. She despises her own brother.*

She might have held that huge gun and climbed atop a tank like she was meant to do nothing else in life but lead armies into battle, but Zinnia couldn’t let that mask the fact that Olivier had done something that didn’t sit well at all in Zinnia’s heart and never would.

She could harbor worry for her now in this fight, she could even find a glimpse of thirst for her arms, but Zinnia’s heart could not forget about the anger that had come into it a day before.

After Olivier began to give orders on her tank, it all happened very quickly, faster than Zinnia was ready for in her daze.

At first, the tanks and their firepower were all Briggs had to defend the fort. But shot after shot they all slowly realized nothing could breach the monster’s skin, and when it did, the skin itself regenerated. This had to be magic, something beyond Drachma’s control. Alchemy, something of Amestrian origin, even. But something foreign in itself, something evil and dark that they needed to kill before it killed them.

At some point, the two kids managed to climb the floors all the way to Development. Zinnia watched them try to aid the soldiers with… alchemy, and when Olivier began to shout questions at them, she could almost feel their fear and she was proud, in the deepest corners of her angry heart, that Olivier had that power. Unfair as it was, perhaps it could be effective. Perhaps the information these kids were now giving her was what she needed to win.

Now, the tanks struggled to cage in the beast in the elevator, needing two of them to push the first one, on which Olivier shouted order after order, instructing, in the end, everyone to succeed and live.

When the monster went up on the elevator at long last, Zinnia went down just in case. She had seen the size of it and she bore no desire to be any closer to it. Its destructive power was terrifying, and only had to look at the lower levels and their current state.

Following the creature, Olivier’s tank entered the elevator, and that was when Zinnia lost sight of them all.
“Oh, you’re here,” Olivier said. She hadn’t expected Zinnia to be in their room after what had happened between them. Most of the men were outside, gathering to talk, to spread the news like gossip. It was a very good way to get everyone informed without having to call them to a meeting.

“Couldn’t stand the noise and stupidity,” Zinnia said. She hadn’t changed out of her clothes yet, hadn’t even taken off her boots. She’d just sat on the bed and tried not to think about what had happened, the absolutely crazy shit she’d seen today and that no one seemed to understand. “What happened out there? Did you kill it?”

Olivier shook her head, standing still at the door frame. She didn’t think it would be appropriate, given the circumstances, to walk in yet and act like everything was okay. She wasn’t sure how much patience and actual degree of wakefulness she had left in her, but she wasn’t going to risk it and pretend she didn’t know why Zinnia’s voice sounded like that.

“Froze it,” Olivier said. “It’s safe now.”

There goes that little word again, Zinnia thought. I wonder if it will ever be true.

“Safe…” she said, chuckling softly to herself. Zinnia finally looked up at her. Olivier truly looked like she’d gone for days without any sleep or food, like she’d been dropped onto a hurricane without blankets or shelter and she’d been expected to make it out alive. Out of sheer stubbornness, she had.

Zinnia looked away; the sight burned her eyes.

“Do you have any idea of what it is?” she asked.

Olivier shook her head and said nothing. Even if she did know more than suspect of a relation between the kids she’d put in the cell and the monster, she wouldn’t tell Zinnia. She couldn’t risk involving her in all of this. This was the sort of thing why her heart felt torn at having a civilian on board.

She leaned her temple on the door frame.

“Are you going to continue sleeping elsewhere tonight?” Olivier asked.

Zinnia scoffed and crossed her arms. “Maybe, yeah. Are you going to continue being shitty to your brother?”

Olivier’s frown appeared on her face quick as lightning.

“Quit it,” she snapped. “It’s none of your business.”

“It’s all of my business!” Zinnia said. She got up from the bed, all fire and anger, walking the few paces to where Olivier was in a few moments. When she stood right before her, small and insignificant against a power that even when dimmed down was much bigger than Zinnia herself, she couldn’t look into those blue eyes for much longer. “You think that’s right? Hating on him like you’re not family?”

The word ‘family’ was a word Olivier didn’t hear, or even think of, often. The Armstrongs weren’t her family anymore, but the people at Briggs were bound to her in ways that were similar to the hierarchy of family. And yet… the word felt foreign to her ears. Alex Armstrong wasn’t her family, even if he might have been once. He had taken everything good Olivier had been jealous of and had never shared it. Not once. And then he’d gotten everything ruined in Ishval.

Olivier felt tempted to say that out loud, to explain in a way why she no longer could see her brother
in him, but she just didn’t. What for? Zinnia wouldn’t ever see it the way Olivier did, she hadn’t lived it.

“You don’t understand,” she said, though. “What he did, it’s no small thing.”

“What you’ve done isn’t, either. How do you think your brother feels? Your other sisters are all away, except for Catherine, and she’s too small. He must feel really alone.”

Like I did! Olivier wanted to yell. Like I did when I was her age. Every single time I did anything, Alex did it better. Now, for once, I’ve outdone him. Can’t I have that? Can’t he be punished for leaving?

But she didn’t say any of that. She knew how childish and selfish it sounded.

In her silence, Zinnia found her chance to go on:

“Olivier, he’s your brother. He’s never done anything to you,” she said, and to Olivier it felt as if she was reading her mind without permission or scruples. How she stayed in silence through what followed would always remain a mystery to her. “He did his best, he probably didn’t understand what your mother was putting you through because he didn’t live it. And trust me… it’s hard to see things happening when you’re being coddled by the same person that’s torturing someone else. It’s not his fault.” Zinnia put a hand to Olivier’s shoulder and dared to look up into her eyes. “But it’s not yours either.”

Olivier thought about it.

“How do you know?” she said. “How do you know it’s not his or my fault?”

“Because neither of you were free to opt out of your home life.”

Olivier sneered.

“You think I was pressured to leave?”

“You didn’t feel at home,” Zinnia said softly.

“And Alex? What do you think was his reason?”

And Zinnia’s answer left her breathless:

“You,” she just replied. “He followed you.”

I will bring honor to this family, like my sister before me, Alex had once said. Now, in this small room in the middle of nowhere, Olivier couldn’t help but think that the only thing he had brought into the Armstrong household had been dishonor, the same thing Olivier had left as a trail behind her since birth.

She let out a puff of air.

“Just—Alright, maybe I should have read the goddamn letter, sent him something back,” she grumbled. “But there’s no point in me doing that now. It’s gone.”

It’s gone and I’ll never know what his first words to me were after everything. It’s not like I want to know, Olivier thought.

“So you just did that to show off in front of the kids?” Zinnia said now, a little less angry. She had
seen Olivier deflate at the thought of her little brother looking up enough to her to follow her out of
t heir childhood home into a cruel world, and she wasn’t entirely sure that the tremors she was seeing
in Olivier’s hands were from the cold. Olivier was never cold.

“No,” she replied, finally moving away from the door to sit, slowly, on the bed as Zinnia followed.
Olivier had missed this bed, even if she’d only been away from it for one night. This bed and the
body that slept on it as well were the only reasons that Olivier could still sleep at night. “They needed
an authority figure to talk to. Would you have preferred for Buccaneer to act as boss?”

The image was hilarious and it didn’t fail to bring a smile to Zinnia’s lips.

“Where have you sent them? The rest of the luxury rooms? I haven’t seen them around here after the
ruckus.”

Olivier shook her head softly. If she’d done it any more energetically, she was sure it would have
throbbed.

“The cells. I’m not sure yet what they want with us, and until I figure it out I want them where I can
see them.”

“And you’re putting them behind bars?”

“They’re prisoners. It’s their rightful place until I decide otherwise.”

“Why?” Zinnia asked. “You think they may be in league with that… thing from underground?” She
realized in Olivier’s silence that that was exactly it. Zinnia had known war was closing in on Briggs,
but she’d had no idea just how much Olivier feared this was the war doing more than just knock on
their doors and ask permission to enter.

Olivier had had questions thrown at her today, questions without answers, questions that begged for
more questions. Her head hurt, her body was weak, and her mind was foggy with death and survival
intertwined, a snake that bites its own tail. And Zinnia… Zinnia who was angry in the name of a
deserter, Zinnia who had left last night to sleep somewhere else… Zinnia, who now didn’t seem to
agree with what Olivier thought was the only thing to do if she wanted her men alive in the morning.
When would people understand that commanding wasn’t about power but about choices? Hard
choices, the ones no one wanted to even imagine themselves in the position of making. Those were
the choices she made every day, the choices she got judged for making, when hardly anyone else
ever could in her place.

“You question my decision?” she just asked, serious.

“Yes.”

Olivier let a bit of air through her nose, one corner of her lip going up in a faint ghost of a smile.
Zinnia’s heart almost stopped on her chest. That was the face of a woman who had given up. And
thus Zinnia realized she had been too harsh on Olivier, even if she may deserve harshness for some
of her actions, forgetting that two days ago she had been freezing and tired and thin, and that since
they’d all returned to Briggs she had had no time to recover from any of it. It had all happened too
fast, too close together. Olivier was literally breathless. And here Zinnia was asking her to run farther
on lungs that no longer extracted enough oxygen from the air.

Swallowing hard, Zinnia put a hand to Olivier’s.

“And I’m also saying you need another day or two in bed. Remember why?”
Those bodies in the snow, soldiers carrying soldiers in the blizzard, and now this invasion. Olivier hadn’t been ready for any of it, despite herself, and it showed painfully on her face, on the way she moved. She might have climbed on a tank without messing up her hair, but Zinnia could see now that she was up close just how weary Olivier had become in the past couple of days.

It was a dangerous level of weary, even for her.

“I’m perfectly fine, thank you.”

She wasn’t.

“God damn it, you’re stubborn...” Zinnia sighed. “How about a bath? You, me, the steam. I’ll talk to you about stories, I’ll tell you how beautiful you are when you’re not being overly rude to people to get your mind off of things...”

There was a monster in the fort, that was something to think about. Something that no amount of stories or compliments would erase from Olivier’s mind tonight or for many nights to come. She would have nightmares about this monster and his sluggish voice and apparent lack of purpose.

“I can bathe alone, thank you very much,” Olivier just said, her voice much dimmer than usual.

“Oh-ho, now you're really sleeping alone,” Zinnia said.

“When you left me alone, it was the worst...” Olivier paused and looked her in the eye, without any challenge in between. “Night...” There had been enough challenge for a day, for a lifetime. “Of my life.”

Zinnia’s hand squeezed Olivier’s.

“Then do something about it next time.”

Just like I’m about to do something.

It was a simple something, the simplest of all. Kind, and perhaps undeserved, but Zinnia didn’t care. Two days ago they had been in a cave, lost to the snow of a blizzard and surrounded by dead men. Zinnia hadn’t been too sure how that was going to end, if she was going to let out the last of her breath while holding Olivier’s hand. And now they were home and their home was being threatened while they stood in it. And Zinnia didn’t have the heart to harbor anything akin to anger right now. Just... worry and pity and love. And all those emotions swelled and swelled in her chest until she couldn’t contain them anymore.

She tilted her head up and brushed Olivier’s lips with her own.

Kind and undeserved... and... desired.

“So you don’t hate me anymore?” Olivier said once it was over. She had tried to sound funny, but the only laughable thing about her utterance was just how weak it had sounded like, how desperate. She shouldn’t even sound like this, she was a general. Her voice needed to guide others, not make them lose faith in their cause.

“I don’t hate you. I hate what you’ve done, how you behaved. There’s a difference.”

“You didn’t act like there was one.”

“My feelings are mine and I know why I had them,” Zinnia said and Olivier knew to stay quiet. She
also had bigger things to worry about than this. A monster, two intruders, and a plot she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

They remained on the bed until the idea to soak in warm water for a while appealed strongly to Olivier’s weary mind and they got up in the middle of the night to hide in a bathtub, sure now that no one would bother them at this hour.

And once there Zinnia wouldn’t let go of what was most important to her. Not the intrusion or the war, but the consequences those things could have on Olivier.

*You’ve forgiven her easily, haven’t you?* Zinnia told herself.

But how could she not? When Alex Armstrong wasn’t here to make Zinnia feel her pity and anger surge, when Olivier was and she looked ten years older just by the weight of these last few days. It hadn’t been easy to live them, and now Zinnia saw them in Olivier’s hunch, in the way she was able for once to be in complete silence, without feeling the need to fill the quiet with banter.

*It’s not about forgiveness, it’s about priorities. And she’s mine. She’s my priority over my anger.*

“You’ve just come from an unsuccessful raid. You’ve lost people. Give yourself a couple of days, step out of it. Sleep in, eat when you’re hungry. Let your mind wander a little.”

Olivier smiled gently against the crown of Zinnia’s head.

“You said you’d tell me a story,” she said. “This isn’t a story.”

“There’s no story. I tricked you into this. Now humor me and take a breather,” Zinnia said.

“I can’t,” Olivier said simply. “The wall isn’t going anywhere.”

Zinnia moved in the water, closer to Olivier’s side, and glanced up at her eyes.

“All walls crumble, sooner or later,” Zinnia said slowly. “You’re no exception.” She sighed. “You need rest and company. And beer,” she added with a grin.

“And beer…” Olivier agreed.

“Good.”

The silence that followed was a mid-silence, with their movements translated into the sounds of the water, and their breathings intertwining in midair as minutes passed and the water in the tub lost warmth in perspiration.

“You did have someone in the war, didn’t you?” Olivier asked after a while, thinking about their other conversation. “It’s personal to you, that I might have wanted the Ishvalan dead before I’d wanted for my brother to betray me.”

*He didn’t betray you, just the force you both serve, Zinnia thought. One day we will both understand that difference.*

Zinnia sighed.

“It is personal. But not for the reason you think,” she said. Then she looked at Olivier. “Have you ever looked at me? I mean, really looked?”

“Yes…” Olivier said softly. “All the time.”
“Then how come you haven’t figured it out yet?”

“Figured what out?” Olivier said.

And Zinnia thought… that she might as well just tell her, to alleviate this between them, or at least to tell her something else about herself. It wasn’t something that she’d lose sleep for every night or troubled her at day, but once it had. For eight years, it had.

“My father is from Ishvalan descent,” Zinnia muttered softly. “I can’t remember if it was my great-grandparents, or my great-great-grandparents. Never met either, of course,” Zinnia added casually. “Someone in my father’s family moved from Ishval to Amestris in a different war.” She sighed. “When the last Ishvalan war broke out, I was fifteen years old. And I remember thinking… that those men in blue that Central was sending east might be killing relatives of mine and I would never know.”

Olivier had the decency to say nothing for a second. She had suspected that someone in her family had fought in the war, someone close to her, but… she had never even imagined this. That a bond so faint could affect someone’s life so much as to leave a room to defend a stranger.

The thought of knowing people who had killed in Ishval now turned dark in the pit of her stomach. Any of them might have put an end to the lives of people who shared Zinnia’s blood. Any of them might have been the reason Zinnia had been scared as a teenager.

Olivier could almost feel it in her fingertips, the life Zinnia might have had at fifteen. So joyful, so small still, a life so full of possibilities. Olivier saw in her mind the images of Zinnia’s exes, waltzing around that life and making it brighter. And then the light was eclipsed by a giant sandstorm coming from the east. The darkness of war.

She opened her eyes again.

“Did we?” she asked in a mutter. Did we kill them?

“I don’t know. My family is as Amestrian now as you and I. But… that war might have killed distant relatives, and we have no way to find out.” Zinnia looked at Olivier again. “But still… even if they weren’t family, they were people. Olivier. It was people those soldiers were killing, and it shouldn’t matter if we knew them or didn’t. Your brother did something at a high personal cost to save them from dying at the hands of the men you serve. That’s worthy of honor where I’m from.”

“We come from very different places, Zinnia.” Olivier reminded her softly. They were back to being a woman and a soldier, tucked neatly together in a bathtub, sealed away from the world. But their differences were seen as clearly as that first day in Iver’s sunny main square.

Olivier came from wealth and a difficult childhood and had grown into a woman who knew how to wield power better than any man, and Zinnia came from nothing and had grown into a woman chasing after the shadow of a life she couldn’t see. In another world, they would have never met. But this time Zinnia had run farther north, and Olivier had decided to leave her fort to go just a little south. It shouldn’t have worked, and yet it was working.

Or is it? Olivier asked herself. This conversation was all the red flag she needed to know that whatever she had put so much effort into keeping might be on the brink of disappearing forever. And then Olivier would be a soldier for life, leaving everything else behind. As it always had been till now.

Zinnia nodded.
“I know. I just... I need you to know that there’s things I can’t tolerate. If you want to hate your brother for what he did, do so. But you won’t hate him in front of me.”

Olivier blinked. She had not missed the tone of the conversation, then. This was an ultimatum, if not a hack to the neck of their relationship. In spite of it not going over her head, Olivier’s surprise was palpable. And, more than her surprise, her judgment of it.

“You would leave me?” she said, almost not believing what she was saying. “Because of my brother, whom you don’t even know?”

“It’s not because of your brother,” Zinnia said. “It’s because you defend the murder of innocent people over your brother’s wellbeing. That’s not something I want to love you for. And I won’t, Olivier.” It was said very calmly, so much so that at first Olivier didn’t understand, she didn’t think they could be hearing those exact words in all their harsh truth while in the bath. “I need you to understand that.”

Slowly, though, Olivier understood. And when she did, she smiled sadly. She could be losing everything tonight and yet she was calm, there was no more room in her for any emotion. These days she barely existed, and to be asked to exist elsewhere, differently than how she had for the past few months, it was to deny her awareness of life again. It was to make of her nothing but an automaton of a general, to take all the human out of her and return her to the state she had been in before. It was a state that saved lives and that cared about them, but it was a state that didn’t allow her to enjoy even a drop of life.

And now Olivier didn’t feel ready to give the downpours up just yet. Not yet, not ever.

But Zinnia had been very clear.

“And you also need me to give you an answer tonight, don’t you?” Olivier said.

“Preferably, yes,” Zinnia said, still calmly, as if this had nothing to do with her and her life wasn’t about to change, too. She had poured so much, both in hiding and out in the open, into making it work, into living it to the fullest. And now that Olivier might choose to give it away, Zinnia didn’t fear losing it. She had told the truth when she had said that she could not love someone that treated the preservation of life like something to be scornful over, she could not love someone who didn’t treat their brother with the decency he deserved.

Olivier saw that tranquility in her eyes and did fear it, although she didn’t have to.

“I won’t lose you,” she just said. There wasn’t anything else she could possibly say, any other option she might choose. “I’d rather learn how to change what I see than lose you all because I’m too stubborn to let go of my point of view.”
The hole

Zinnia dreamed of heights and destruction that night. She dreamed that the floor collapsed and dirt sprouted upwards as the monster emerged, only this time it sought to bring chaos, not just to stroll idly. In her dream, she was powerless against it, standing not on the higher levels but right there by the opening on the floor panels. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she tried to back away, find solace in a wall and hide behind a pillar, but the monster soon caught sight of her, tiny compared to his huge frame, and did not stop moving until it had her in range.

She closed her eyes out of instinct when the giant clawed hands of the monster came at her, and she woke up in a beam of light.

Dawn, another new day, and she was alive. It had all been a fabrication of her brain, a reminder of the danger they were all sleeping above of.

A monster in their territory, an opening underneath them, and the uncertainty that came with it. Zinnia suspected magic, alchemy, something bigger than life that she could never understand, but no one had answers.

Olivier hadn’t given her any last night, changing the subject, focusing on the elephant in the room for once.

Zinnia turned a little on the bed, her muscles tense and aching after having spent so many hours in the same position, and faced Olivier’s back. What did she know that she wasn’t telling? Zinnia had seen her exchanging words with the kids, but with the firing of the tanks and the noise she hadn’t been able to hear anything. And anything, precisely, might have been what those kids had told Olivier.

The options were many, each getting scarier than the last. Zinnia had been ready for a war against Drachma—the promised war—and she had been more than willing to see it through, to participate in it in hopes of surviving it with the rest of her friends, but this had shocked her greatly. A monster, two kids, and the uncertainty that enveloped it all.

Zinnia turned again on the bed. It was still early enough that she should have no trouble falling back asleep, yet the questions plagued her. Many of them, whispered right into her brain, into the subconscious that wouldn’t let her dream again or might have conspired against her mind to bring her nightmares again. She stayed awake, then, trying not to move too much and thinking… thinking that maybe this would be worse than the promised war, because it was unprecedented. Briggs had already won against Drachma once, but they had never faced what had breached their security last night. There was no protocol for this, and Zinnia knew she would have trouble following it as it was construed.

Suddenly, a pale hand slammed itself onto Zinnia’s face. She just took a deep breath, freed her own hand from underneath the covers and gently pulled at the foreign hand until it was away from her head. Her expression, torn between annoyance and amusement, was that of a person who had has this happen to her in previous occasions.

A murmur came after, and the body beside Zinnia’s came closer to her, caging her against the wall. Zinnia pushed a little, still devoted to being gentle, but Olivier, in her sleep, would not bulge.
“Olivier…” Zinnia whispered, shaking the other woman. “Olivier.”

Olivier took a deep breath beside her, then opened her eyes and turned to her side to look her in the eye.

“What? What is it?” she grumbled.

“You’re compressing me into a thin layer,” Zinnia said.

Olivier moved immediately, getting comfortable, closer to the edge of the mattress.

“Sorry…”

Zinnia sat up on the bed and watched Olivier close her eyes again, huddling her legs towards her stomach and hugging herself. It was endearing to watch her prepare for sleep like this, in plain daylight—most of the details would go unseen late at night. This was similar to catching a predator in the middle of its specific preparations for laying down somewhere for the night.

“Are you going to sleep more?” Zinnia whispered.

Olivier growled under her breath, cracking an eye open at her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice muddled with sleep yet. Zinnia’s heart fluttered painfully when she remembered that it had been a couple of sleepless nights for Olivier lately, and she wished they had only just been sleepless. Death had rid them of the joy one would have expected to find in people coming back home and the rested mind of a warrior that finally has the upper ground.

“I had a nightmare,” Zinnia said. “About the monster.”

Olivier was silent; she wasn’t sure what to say to that. Nobody had prepared her to face such a creature, and certainly no one had taught her how to deal with the aftermath of that.

“It came after me, it wanted to kill me…” she continued in a lower voice. The thought of it, clearer and sharper now that she was awake, was enough to frighten her. She hadn’t thought that the dream had affected her this much, but she was a little breathless, and she wanted all of a sudden to send all of this to hell and try to go back asleep if only to erase the image of the monster chasing her.

Olivier put a finger to Zinnia’s lips.

“It can’t touch you now,” she said. “It’s rotting in ice outside.”

“I know,” Zinnia muttered. “It’s just… It feels like we’re under invasion already.”

She had no idea that it could be put into words, but somehow this was it, the feeling that even if the Drachman were miles and miles away, in a way something darker and more dangerous had already infiltrated the sturdy walls of Briggs and now would refuse to exit them until the true war was here to stay.

Zinnia didn’t want to fear war. But that was an empty wish, and fear a wise choice.

Olivier licked her lips. She knew just what to say, yet she didn’t want to say it. Because it would be a lie to say that everything was okay and that everything would be going back to normal after these last few days. She wasn’t a fan of lies, she preferred to bring the truth forward to the people she trusted. It was, after all, a stronger shield than the best concocted of lies in these circumstances. But she saw something in Zinnia’s eyes that made her rethink that. She had Zinnia to protect now, as she always
had, only now the danger was more imminent. The lies came easier to her, then, but she wouldn’t be exempt from them freezing her heart a little more every time she spoke them.

“This is nothing to worry about,” Olivier said in the end. “It’s under control now.”

Zinnia grabbed Olivier’s wrist and pierced her eyes with her own.

“I saw it in the flesh,” she said. “From above. I saw that monster. I’ve never seen anything like it before. And no one knows where it came from or why it’s here.”

“No one, unfortunately, includes me.”

And that much was true already, all Olivier had to cling to were suspicions that for now still went unconfirmed. She had hoped that the new day would shed some light on them.

“Do the kids have anything to do with the monster?” Zinnia asked.

“Not as far as I’m aware,” Olivier lied. If she knew anything, she knew there was a connection, faint as she hoped it might be, between those kids and the monster that had crawled from underground. And she was going to find it and get to the bottom of this gratuitous attack on her fort. “But... Zinnia, you shouldn’t worry about this. Let me worry about it. It won’t do you any good if you’re involved, if will only cause you headaches.”

Zinnia smiled sadly.

“I wondered how long it would take you to bring that up,” she said. “I live here too, you know? I’ve shared your distress more often than not in the past few months, I’ve shared your feeling of community, and I’m a part of it now, whether you and your soldiers like it or not. I live here with you, and that means I won’t feel as safe as you want me to be until I know what’s going on, just like anybody else might.”

Olivier frowned now.

“You’re my guest,” she said clearly. “First and foremost, you’re that.”

“Pretty, Olivier,” Zinnia teased.

“Take me seriously for one second, would you?” Olivier said. “You will be safe if you do what I say and stay out of it.” She pushed the covers away and stood. The sight of her, barely clothed, hair ruffled, did not make Zinnia forget what the strength of her could be, even so early in the morning. “The monster’s down, and all I can tell you for now is that I’ll do my best to try and coax answers out of those two boys. And then the whole place will be safe again.” She sighed. “Or as safe as it can be. These are times of war, you’d do well in remembering that.”

“You think I’m not aware of that?” Zinnia mumbled under her breath, sitting on the mattress. “I’ve nowhere else to go. I just want to know what’s going on instead of waltzing around the place like it’s safe at all.”

Olivier grabbed her uniform from her chair and began dressing.

“Stay here today, would you?” she said; her tone was final. “I’ll see you later.”

Zinnia made an attempt to fight back and Olivier put a finger beneath Zinnia’s chin.

“Don’t make me yell at you, flower girl.”
Zinnia’s ferrous expression gave way to a tiny smile.

“Because you so hate yelling.”

“Stay here,” Olivier repeated, more gently this time. “I’ll be back later, and I promise I will tell you what I can.”

Finally dressed, Olivier exited the room. Zinnia knew a lie when she saw one.

*Stay here my ass,* Zinnia thought, reaching out from the bed to get her clothes too. She would be damned if she had to stay caged in here all day, waiting for Olivier to take pity on her and decide to stop lying. She would just have to get out there and try and find answers herself, even if she had to ask every last soldier on Briggs.

It was a hole the width of a building, and it was right at the heart of Briggs, as if someone had shot an arrow at it from beneath the ground, knowing full well where it would do more damage.

Olivier observed it quietly, but she raged inside. For fifteen years, she had defended this place with tooth and nail and had been successful in keeping it an impenetrable fortress, earning her her nickname. And now a creature that seemed to crawl from hell itself had brought all that down, turning it into rumble for Olivier to watch in silence.

She had sent for men to go down this hole and inspect it. She would have gone down with them herself if she didn’t have damages to repair and people to organize. This was the sort of thing where she preferred to volunteer than to have men risk their safeties without reason, but Miles had insisted, seeing the bags under her eyes and her strained expression, that she sit this one out. He all but had hinted at the last time, where her presence hadn’t been able to save those soldiers from dying in the cold, and she had acquiesced.

Buccaneer arrived at the scene as noisily as ever, his automail clanking with every step he took. He stood with her for a moment, leaning forward to see if there was anything that stood at attention without the hole. She wondered if he would show any surprise at the realization that it was, indeed, just a hole.

“Are the horses ready?” she asked him.

“They’re lining up already to come here, sir.”

“Grand,” she said.

They waited a little longer and said nothing. She had the feeling, though, that Buccaneer desperately wanted to start speaking, even if it was just to chitchat about the weather, but that her sheer presence was enough to put it off it. She was glad, she wasn’t having the kind of day where her patience was at its best to withstand Buccaneer’s eccentricity.

“It looks… dark,” a known voice said to her right. Olivier looked up and found Zinnia there, with the face of someone who knows that she is disobeying orders and does not care in the slightest.

Olivier rolled her eyes, still trying to go for the quiet and calm approach.

“This is where I should start yelling,” she warned.
A neigh close by distracted her from that luxurious yelling she was about to unleash on Zinnia for being a stubborn woman. The men had finally arrived, riding their horses towards the system of pulleys that had been built overnight to lower the men onto the hole.

“Are you coming with, general?” someone asked Olivier.

“That is an honor I reserve for you,” she said, joking, although her tone didn’t deliver the message.

Her soldiers stared at her for some time.

“I expect it won’t take long to inspect it?” she said, changing the subject.

“Depends on the size of it,” someone else said.

She nodded.

“Of course,” she said. “Good luck.”

She kept watching, hands behind her back, as Buccaneer took care of lowering each and every man and horse onto the darkness. Her heart ached as if she was sending them to an early death already. She had to tell herself that there was no reason to think that. It was, after all, just a hole in the ground, and the scariest thing they may find would be insects and worms, nothing else. Nevertheless, she grew unstill.

“Will they be alright?” Zinnia asked. “It’s pitch black down there.”

Olivier had to clear her throat to speak.

“My soldiers aren’t scared of the dark,” she replied, looking at the darkness engulf her men.

“Everyone’s a little scared of the dark.” Zinnia said.

And Olivier supposed that might hold some truth to it. There was something in what could not be perceived that confounded the senses enough to have them fear what would be hiding in the shadows, even if it was perfectly safe outside of one’s own mind.

She wondered for a fleeting moment if she would be scared, had it been her down there, in contrast to her being scared for those men going in now.

“Have the kids revealed anything new?” Zinnia asked.

Olivier hadn’t had time to pay them a visit yet, she’d had a lot on her mind to set straight, but perhaps she should think about the answers those boys might give under the pressure of having spent a night in chains.

“I’ll wait until the incursion returns to question them again. I want to be able to contrast their information with our own.”

Zinnia nodded and bit her lip. She’d hoped Olivier had gone to their cell already. This meant she would get no information now either and would definitely have to resort to her plan B of asking around as subtly as she could. She glanced quickly at Buccaneer and Miles and considered them her first victims. They were the ones likely to have the same amount of information that Olivier did, the rest of the soldiers might just know as little as Zinnia at the moment.

The apparatus stopped working; all the men were inside the hole now and had begun to ride forward onto the darkness.
“All done,” Buccaneer announced, wiping his forehead with his flesh hand. “Anything else that needs doing, general?”

Olivier shook her head. When Miles nodded as a salutation and began to leave, she walked towards him.

“Major,” she called, having him turn around to face her and stop on his tracks. “I have a mission for you.”

Miles stood there, expectant.

“I want you to escort Mr Kimblee to the fort.”

Buccaneer gasped, well within earshot.

“Why does Miles always get the good stuff? I have to pull down an entire horde of horses down but he gets the mission?” he said to Zinnia.

Olivier ignored him. She had no time for this now.

Miles blinked, not understanding.

“I don’t trust him, I want an eye on him at all times,” she explained. “Find out if he has any ties to Drachma’s plan to attack us and find out about his assailant before you bring him here.”

“Why tell me this now?” Miles asked. “Why now and not yesterday, when the news of his attack came?”

“It’s too much of a coincidence. The Drachman were to attack this January, and now at the break of the new year we have an intruder from underground and a visit from the Crimson Alchemist, no less.”

“Does this mean that the Elric brothers are off the hook?”

“Not entirely,” she said. “You won’t need to worry about them. Leave that to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ride now.”

Miles walked away and Olivier didn’t come back to the hole, she disappeared into one of the elevators. Zinnia watched, jaw dropped slightly, unable to believe she hadn’t been yelled at for disobeying her. Olivier was so used to people following her that she had trouble sometimes remembering that Zinnia was a civilian and that Olivier had no power over her. No real power, anyway.

“He’s always being sent away, like he’s the favorite!” Buccaneer complained, crossing his arms.

“What are you, Buccaneer, her son?” Zinnia said jokingly.

“Don’t deny me the certainty of knowing he’s her favorite.”

“Maybe she doesn’t send you away because she wants you safe here.”

“And what harm could come to me going to a damn hospital to escort an alchemist, huh?”
“Now that you mention it,” Zinnia said, smirking, “It probably is safer in that hospital than it is here in the fort. Maybe she just wants you in danger all the time.” She grinned evilly.

“She just wants to spite me,” he grumbled.

Zinnia punched him softly in the flesh arm.

“Anyway,” he said with a sigh, “better get back to work, eh? I’ve dishes to wash.”

“Good luck with that,” she said with a laugh. And as he began to leave, she remembered she was actually here to ask questions and not to chitchat and ran up to him. “Hey, um, you don’t happen to know where the kids are, do you?”


“Just… curious about where they are. I haven’t seen them in the rooms.”

“Oh,” he said, “that’s because they’re not in one.” He grinned widely. “We put them in a cell upstairs, one of the small ones. Boss’s orders, you know.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you liked those orders?”

“I don’t trust those kids,” he said, serious now. “Stay away from them, will you?”

“Sure,” she lied. “You know I don’t like trouble.”

“Good,” he said. “And now I really need to go. See you around.”

She smiled to herself as he left. One of the cells upstairs, he’d said? The small ones? She wasn’t sure just how many cells Briggs had, but knowing this would narrow her search, even if by a hairsbreadth.

She acted naturally, walking up to higher levels next to the boiler, where the cells were, as if she’d been sent there by Olivier herself, and no one questioned her. Such was the hive mind of the fort that unless they were all performing some special duty everyone walked around as if everybody else was behaving their best.

It took some investigating, but Zinnia found the place at last. She was surprised at how warm it was and she thought to herself that perhaps it would be a decent idea to have the dorms installed somewhere near this place instead of the cells, because it was more important for morale to have warm bedrooms for the soldiers than to give the prisoners the luxury of not being cold all the time.

Unluckily, she wasn’t alone. A couple of men were already there, gathered towards the entrance of one cell in particular—one of the small ones. She quickly went to join them as if she’d been there the whole time, and even though she was behind several broad and tall men, the sight of the armor and the child didn’t escape her.

“Hey there,” a soldier said. “We just wanted to say thanks for last night. It was very brave to stand up to that thing. And… we’re sorry you’re being rewarded with this.”

“Get us out of here, then,” the scrawny kid, Ed, said.

The soldier, one of the newbies Austin hung out with, suddenly got very very serious.

“Only the general can do that.”
Ed frowned. “Then stick all that wonderful gratitude up your—”

Everybody left in a haste like they didn’t want to listen to the end of Ed’s sentence as Ed murmured something else to himself, then he realized one person had stayed behind.

“And what do you want, girlie?”

Zinnia crossed her arms and made sure whatever little bulge she had on her biceps didn’t go unnoticed.

“Girlie? Really?” she said. “I’m at least a decade older than you, little fella.”

Al tapped Ed on the shoulder when he saw his brother was getting red in the face from the anger arising at the mention of him being ‘little’.

“She must be the first woman soldier in years…”

“You think I care about that right now?” Ed shook his shackles dramatically. “I’m handcuffed!”

Zinnia stifled a laugh. She had to admit this duo was kind of comical in the right light. It was hard to view them as potentially threatening individuals who had brought a monster alongside them, to be honest. And they were silly enough to think she, the most civilian ever to civilian, was anything that resembled a soldier. Sure, she knew a thing or two about military life, but mostly by proxy.

Zinnia decided she would play along with the soldier thing, then. It would buy her more information than if she revealed herself to be Olivier’s… partner.

“My boss is under the impression that you two have something to do with the monster from last night.”

“Your boss barks a lot and bites even more than that,” Ed snapped. “Why would any of you listen to her?”

Zinnia arched an eyebrow.

“Is she right?”

“And why would I tell you that, huh? Why don’t you go ask her?”

Zinnia smirked.

“I can get the word out to free you if you keep me informed.”

Ed frowned even more deeply and observed her for some seconds.

“You’re what? An officer at best?” he said bitingly. “I really doubt you have any power to stay true to that promise.”

Zinnia laughed. “I bet I could surprise you.”

“We aren’t in any way related to that monster,” Al said. “But we can understand why the general would think so. We’re living hard times.”

“But you do know more than you’re telling anyone,” Zinnia said.

Ed lost his temper again.
“Do people actually think with their heads before speaking bullshit?” he said. “Of course we know more. Do you think I’d be behind bars if I didn’t?”

“What we know, we can’t share. It’s too dangerous,” Al intervened. “That’s what we told the general, but she won’t believe us.”

Zinnia shook her head. “And she won’t. Tough nut to crack, that woman. But perhaps you don’t have to tell her everything. Just bits of the truth.” She sighed. “I know she looks like she might devour the world in just a bite most days, but you’ve caught us unprepared. Days ago… we lost people in the snow. There’s a war coming and keeping us all safe from it is all she cares about lately. If you can show her—truly show her—that whatever’s going on has nothing to do with that war, then maybe she’d let you go.”

“Have you seen her?” Ed shrieked. “She won’t let us go until she’s sucked us dry.”

“I told you,” Zinnia said. “I’ll get you out if you help me. Here, no one knows a thing about this monster or why there’s a hole underneath us. I may not be a general or a captain or anything like that, but I am honest to my word. I just want to know what we’re facing.”

“So you can tell her.”

“She’ll find out sooner or later. I’m running against her in this. Whatever you do, she’ll find out by other means, and then it’ll be hell for you for not telling the truth. I just want to know what’s coming. I’d hate to have to fight it blindly.”

Ed and Al shared one glance and began to mumble among themselves.

“We can’t tell anyone,” Ed said.

“I know, but… maybe we should warn them. They don’t need to know everything, just…”

“It’s the north, it’ll never reach them.”

“Of course it will!” Al said, slightly higher in pitch than normal. “It’ll reach everyone, sooner or later.”

“Fine, fine,” Ed said to calm him down. “But… an officer, really? You really think this girlie here won’t go running to her after this?”

“I don’t know.” Al said in his ‘let’s trust this’ voice. “But we can’t stay here and do nothing. Every minute we waste is another life that may be lost.”

Ed growled and faced Zinnia again.

“You’ll get us out of here if we tell you—in broad terms—what’s going on?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Then you’d better be all ears.”

It was a story of loss before it was anything else. A house, burned to the ground with the monstrosity still in it, with the last ghosts of these children’s bodies. A never-ending quest to restore what had been lost that day in October that had led the Elric brothers to find secrets they had never feared existed, that had led them to know that the monster Briggs had buried in ice wasn’t the first and wouldn’t be the last. A plot led by Central Command and the senior staff of the military that little by
little the brothers were finding out more about. And something big, very big, that loomed over all of them without letting itself be seen, something that no one could pinpoint exactly and yet everyone knew was there somewhere, which is why the two kids had traveled all the way north, because Alex Armstrong had thought they might find a trusted ally in his sister.

“Your general has turned out to be very different from him,” Ed complained.

“I think I might know what Alex thought you might see in her.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ed said. “Then you’re all blind. She’s just another one of them Central dogs.”

“You’re wrong, you know?” Zinnia said. “If you told her what you’ve told me, then things might be different.”

“We’re not going to bet everything we have on a ‘might’.”

“I understand that.” Zinnia nodded. “Thank you for sharing your story with me. Can I count on you to keep me updated if you discover anything else?”

“Not much we can discover in a cell…” Ed muttered under his breath.

“Brother!” Al admonished him. Then he turned to her. “You can count on us to help.”

“I’ll get you out of here as soon as I can,” Zinnia promised. She got back on her feet (she’d sat on the floor halfway through the story) and set on her way out.

Once they were alone, the two brothers looked at each other.

“You really think she’s legit?” Ed asked.

“She’s nowhere near as brutal about her questions as the general was,” Al said. “That inspires trust.”

“We can’t afford to trust too easily.”

“I know,” Al said. “Is that why you didn’t elaborate on the Homunculi?”

Ed sighed.

“The less she knows, the better. Whatever these Briggs men are, they’re not our friends.”

“Yet.”

Ed groaned at the open display of optimism and huddled on one corner of the cell.

The hours ticked away slowly at first. Olivier could not stop looking at the clock, focusing on every second it marked. Despite what she’d said earlier to get out of things, she didn’t have much to do. All she had planned on doing was sulk somewhere in her office and try to find a way out of this conundrum, this puzzle without pieces.

The way she’d imagined it, the incursion would have been back soon with news. News that would fill the gaps in her understanding of what was going on. News that would mean she wouldn’t be questioning her prisoners on half a hunch.
But time passed and the soldiers did not return. Whatever they had found, it was large enough that it would take longer to properly examine.

*This is bigger than any of us is prepared to handle.* That had been her first and only conclusion. If this had been a regular hole, her soldiers would have come back up immediately. If this was anything remotely close to regular, those two kids would not be behind bars because of their inability to answer her questions.

“I can’t answer,” Ed had said time and time again. No matter what Olivier asked him, no matter how vague her inquisitiveness was, the boy was in no place to ease her doubts. She would just have to deal with this while continuing to have them.

*I can’t answer, I can’t answer, I can’t answer.*

It was an endless song, and it became even more bottomless with every minute that passed that Olivier sat away in her office, her isolation self-imposed, and pondered over what exactly she was missing that that meddling kid knew.

She tapped her fingers against the wood of her desk. Time seemed to pass slowly, as if it were poorly digesting the week’s last events. Anyone, even time, would have trouble processing everything.

How could Olivier sit here and not grab her coveted answers by the hem of the shirt, lift them up from the ground and pierce their eyes, convincing them without words to finally tell their story? She was wasting time here. The incursion would not return earlier just because she wished it to.

If she wanted this done, she would have to do it herself.

She would have to coax a final ‘I can’t answer’ from the Elric boy.

She would have to tear the truth from his tongue.

And she’d do it without blinking.

With Buccaneer by her side, her resolve thickened. She would have to stand three times as proud to make up for his usual geekiness.

“Unchain them,” she ordered him in front of the boys.

“Fucking finally,” Ed said as Buccaneer got the cell door open and entered, a tinier key in his hand to take their shackles off.

He rubbed his wrists after Buccaneer was done, but the other one, the one in the armor, Olivier noticed he didn’t do such a thing. *A hollow armor wouldn’t feel the friction of the handcuffs,* she thought to herself. There lay one of her questions for them today, although the bulk of them still was about the incident, the monster, and the hole.

“Are we finally going to be treated like people?” Ed dared to ask.

Olivier glared at him.

Buccaneer contented himself with pushing the boy out of the cell and staying behind to let Al pass.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Olivier replied without looking at him. “You’ll have to earn it.”

“Earn it???” Ed yelled. “We saved your men!”
“Shut your tiny little mouth and walk!” she just said.

She counted on Buccaneer to make them follow silently. When she heard a smack, she supposed it had landed on the back of the boy’s neck and that it had sufficed in keeping him quiet.

She didn’t expect them to know where she was taking them, but she hadn’t anticipated their surprise either. Al couldn’t repress a gasp when he saw she had taken them to the hole.

A vast array of horses awaited them there, all ready to be hauled down and most already mounted. Four of them, nevertheless, remained without a soldier riding them.

“Are those for us?” Al asked.

“Indeed,” Olivier said, approaching her own horse and getting on it.

“What?” Ed scoffed. “No having to walk like slaves?”

She didn’t deign that with an answer.

“I hope you know how to ride,” she just said.

“Do I know how to ride?” Ed mumbled at a loud tone as he walked towards one of the horses, got his foot in the stirrup and tried to mount the animal.

After several tries, he became so obsessed with getting on the horse that his mumbling got worse. It took a swift push from Buccaneer to get him to finally pass a leg over the animal’s side.

Everyone was already waiting for him, even Al.

“Don’t fall off,” Olivier said. Then she nodded to Buccaneer, who got into position and readied to lower the horses one by one. Thankfully, it wasn’t as big a party as the one that had left earlier that day.

Once all the horses were inside the hole, Buccaneer backed down a couple of steps to gain momentum for a jump. Seen from down below, it was a terrifying sight, that of a giant leaping in, threatening to crush them all beneath the soles of his huge boots.

Olivier waited for him to get atop his horse to begin moving. She had no desire to begin an incursion herself, just to get far enough from the opening so that nobody could overhear them, especially with Zinnia being around waiting to fall upon the right information.

There was no sound beneath the ground, and the eerily quietness of it all uneased her. Even the steps of the horses on the dirt was muffled, she couldn’t focus on it to remain sane. All she had were the buzzing thoughts in her head of theories and conspiracies, and above all the mystery surrounding this armor and this child. They had remained quiet despite being chained, despite being threatened and questioned.

*At a great risk, hiding that sort of information can only mean there’s something—or someone—they’re intent on protecting. Perhaps both.*

A horse moved closer to her own.

“General,” Buccaneer whispered, breaking the silence. “We’re going in too deep.”

She nodded.
“This should be far enough, then,” she said. Her voice rose for everyone in the party to hear her. “Dismount!”

Someone had brought a lamp with them, a small tinkering source of warm orange light in the darkness of the tunnel, and they set it on the floor.

“Try to see what you can make of the tunnel,” she ordered the few soldiers that had come down with them. When she realized Buccaneer was moving away with them, she called him back. “Not you, captain.”

”Not me?” he said, his voice exceedingly hopeful.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

She faced the boys now. She didn’t just see two children, she perceived defiance, big enough to battle with her stubbornness. Perhaps it would be decisive enough to mark the beginning of another war, very different from the one she’d been prepared to fight.

*What could they possibly be hiding that’s so important?*

“Now you’re safe from the wrong ears,” she said clearly.

“You’re the wrong ears, lady…” Ed muttered to himself. Al elbowed him.

“I want the truth,” she continued. “The *whole* truth. Whatever… or whoever it is you’re hiding from me, it’s clear it’s worth something to you. The question is, is it worth facing the fate that would await you if you don’t confide in me?”

Ed and Al shared a brief glance. Apparently, they didn’t need words in order to set their collective priorities straight. It was clear to Olivier that however much of a team they were, the one who called the shots was the short and extremely pedantic one.

Despite the behavior he had sported in the past couple of days, when Ed turned to face Olivier, his expression was no longer defiant and cold. It surprised her just how young and small he looked, how defenseless. And it shocked her beyond belief when he opened his mouth, eyes fix on her, to say the exact opposite thing of what she’d been expecting to hear.

“The truth is, general, that we need your help.”

“That can’t be, Austin, you’re cheating!” Zinnia said. It was the third time she’d lost while playing cards with him. Granted, he’d had to teach her a few days back on how to play this particular game that Briggs men had invented, but she’d prided herself in not being too bad at it. At least, that is, until she’d played against him for the first time without him acting as a pseudo teacher.

“I don’t cheat. It’s against my code of honor.”

“You military folk don’t have a code of honor about *playing* cards.”

“Just my general code of honor, then,” he said with a dashing smile as he picked up all the cards again and began to mix them idly.

Zinnia hit the table with both fists.
“It’s not fair, you’re too good at it.”

He shrugged.

“There’s little else to do here beside gossip and play cards, what do you want me to tell you?”

Zinnia blew her hair away from her face and took a chunk of bread from the loaf to spread a generous amount of butter on it. She opened her mouth wide and fit the entire piece in her mouth while Austin watched, horrified.

“That’s disgusting.”

“What?” she said, mouth full. “Just because I’m a lady I’m supposed to eat like one?”

He didn’t look too sure about what to say.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Well, fuck you. No one in this fort is a lady.”

She swallowed.

“Do you want me to crush you at this game again or what?” he said.

“Nuh-huh,” she said. “You said there’s gossip and cards. I’m bad at cards, worse at gossip. Catch me up.”

He glanced inquisitively at her.

“Since when are you hunting for gossip instead of being at the heart of it?”

“Since I’m supposed to be trapped inside my own room for the sake of ‘safety’—” Zinnia did air quotes around that word. “—and I’m bored out of my mind. Everything’s too quiet today.”

Austin shrugged again.

“It’s the incursion,” he said. “Everyone’s waiting for news.”

“Any theories on who those two kids are?”

Austin made a face.

“I’ve heard a few,” he said. “Most ranging from Drachman spies that haven’t been taught how the world works yet to just two kids who happened to get caught in the middle of this while the general was in a mood.”

Zinnia rolled her eyes. “Isn’t she always?”

“Wouldn’t you be cautious too if two kids seemed to be involved in the appearance of a big invincible monster?”

Zinnia leaned towards him over the table and whispered acidly:

“I’d probably be much more worried about the big invincible monster instead.”

“I’d be full of questions.”
She rubbed at the crown of his head with her knuckles and sat back down on the bench.

“You tend to be, yeah,” she said. “How about answers?”

“Why are you so intent on figuring out what’s going on? It almost looks like it’s personal.”

“It’s not,” she said. “I just want to know what we’re facing. But our boss apparently thinks I’m not worthy. She thinks I should stay in, sheltered from everything she’s taught me to fight.”

Austin put a hand to her own.

“Zinnia, you know why she’s doing it, quit bitching,” he said, looking her in the eye. “She doesn’t know what’s happening, does she? I wouldn’t put my… girl­friend at risk either in these circumstances. Anything could be behind the attack. ‘Anything’, unluckily for you, has the potential to harm you if you don’t have the training.”

Zinnia didn’t look away.

“I doubt it’s the kind of thing there’s even training for, Austin.”

Olivier had trouble staying neutral. Whatever she’d thought she knew about this, it had been debunked easily in a story that took ten minutes to finish. Some of the concepts she needed to be explained, for no amount of basic knowledge of alchemy from the past when Alex was preparing for his exam could ever have taught her enough. And it didn’t just stop there. The story lengthened. Alchemy was but the thread that linked together every catalyst in the story. Alchemy that had created the Homunculi and would be used by the enemy to create philosopher stones, alchemy that the Führer had put to good use already for muddled ends that had led to high levels of corruption in the senior staff of the military.

Olivier’s world was swimming in gallons and gallons of the ghost of alchemy.

“And my brother sent you north?” she asked, after the story was over. That had been a detailed glossed over in Ed’s telling of it.

“A man was killed in Eastern Command,” Ed said. “Your brother’s been working there up until recently. He’s been helping us, but there came a point he couldn’t help any further on his own.”

“Eastern Command, huh?” Olivier said. “We’ve trained with them in the past. I would hate for them to get involved in this.”

“Mustang included, sir?” Buccaneer said humorously.

“Mustang can suck my dick.”

Ed and Al looked at each other at the abrasiveness of the general’s words.

“Never mind him,” she said in the end. “I still don’t see the link between all you’ve told me and the Xingese girl you claimed to be searching for.”

“We believe alkahestry may have a role to play,” Al said. “It’s a force Amestris isn’t knowledgeable
about, it might be able to help us fight Father and his creatures.”

“And this tunnel?” Olivier asked, frowning. There were too many loose pieces in this puzzle, and she was not going to stop until these kids helped her bring them all together in a coherent manner. “You are alchemists, what do you make of it?”

She and Buccaneer watched in silence as the kids spread out a little, laying on the floor at times to make meticulous calculations that would most likely go over her head. They seemed to know what they were doing, and that only scared Olivier. How old could they be? In their story dates had been fumbled over, as if they weren’t important, and that is precisely why she knew they must be. The blond kid couldn’t be more than fifteen, scrawny and angry as only teenagers were, and the voice that came from the armor, although metallic, sounded strangely childlike to her.

Buccaneer left her to pace around the boys, as if he could sniffle out any intent on escaping or betraying them. Olivier doubted it. She had let them loose long enough that they could have grabbed the horses and followed the tunnel until they found another exit. If they hadn’t done so yet, they wouldn’t. Not after having confided in her.

“And well?” she called after a while.

The boys joined her immediately, with Buccaneer still acting as their shadow.

“When your men return from their incursion, they will confirm this, but I guess it does no harm in telling you now as well,” Ed said. “This tunnel most likely didn’t originate in Drachma.”

Olivier nodded. It was too big at first glance, too intricate to be of their doing. They were too busy camping miles away from the border waiting for the perfect moment to attack. They had always been brutes, following ancient arts of war, and Olivier should have heeded that before.

“Why?”

“It’s just a guess, there’s no way to check it, but chances are this tunnel is built in the shape of a giant circle.”

Buccaneer gasped.

“What’s wrong with you now?” Olivier asked him angrily.

“Boss, in alchemy that’s the symbol for harnessing power,” he said hushedly, as if he feared being heard by the wrong ears. “It’s what directs the energy towards any transmutation processes.”

“You mean to say someone has been deliberately building an alchemical circle?” Olivier said. “To what purpose?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Ed said. “The only thing I’m sure of right now is that the plot we uncovered in probably behind it. But we’d still need to look at this more closely, examine more ground.” He looked at Olivier as if he was requesting permission.

She nodded curtly at him, granting it.

“How long do you need?”

Al, who had been quiet for the most part during the past couple of minutes, slowly rose from the patch of dirt he’d been studying and approached his brother.
They mumbled among themselves for a few seconds, then Ed turned to the general.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a map handy, would you?”

Olivier glanced up at Buccaneer, who shook his head.

“No, why?” she said.

“We’ve a hunch,” Ed told her, his face suddenly paler in the dim light of the lamp. “I’d like to test it.”

Al grabbed a fallen root from the ground and began drawing, more precisely than anything Olivier had seen before, until a slapdash map of Amestris appeared on the dirt.

“Will this do?” he said.

Ed took the root from his brother’s hands. His voice trembled when he spoke.

“Have you any knowledge about all events in the history of Amestris that were accompanied by bloodshed?” he asked in a serious mutter.

Olivier gulped. She had no idea where he was going at with this, but it was the first time she had seen only fear, not mixed with defiance, in his eyes.

She began to list them, dates and casualties, as the boy drew smaller circles around where the cities of the events were. When she was done, mentioning the Ishvalan War, Ed took a deep breath, that of a man who already knew his suspicions had been correct, and began to link together the cities until something like the markings her brother Alex used to study appeared before their very eyes.

She couldn’t help but gasp.

Even if she didn’t understand just yet, she knew this was no ordinary alchemy.

Al and Ed shared a poignant look, and for several seconds no one dared speak, until Ed did, ever the spokesperson:

“It’s the same transmutation circle we found in the Fifth Laboratory, when we found out about the philosopher stones.”

Buccaneer growled.

“The philosopher stone draws power from human lives, doesn’t it?” The boys nodded. “If they make one with something this huge, how many people will have to die?”

His tone was barbaric and angered enough that Olivier’s heart almost stopped in her chest. She didn’t know he was knowledgeable about any of this, least of all knowledgeable enough to understand at once that there were lives at risk. She repressed a tremor as she gulped the information away, but her second of weakness was easily concealed by the kids’s astonishment at Buccaneer’s ample array of alchemical familiarity.

“What?” he said, blushing slightly. “Can’t a man read?”

“Not…very specific alchemical texts???” Ed said in disbelief.

“Hey,” Buccaneer complained. “I had a turtle when I was a kid. I wanted to know how to bring it back when they died.”
“And did you try it?” Al asked.

Ed elbowed his metal brother in what should have been his ribs.

“What. The. Fuck!” he said. “Don’t encourage this! How is a turtle important when we’re talking about something like this?”

Olivier sighed. It wasn’t, it would never be, but perhaps she now had discovered a secret side to her captain that might be of use in the days that were to come.

“Because it’s Buccaneer,” she said, trying to be humorous and yet sounding as dead as the captain’s turtle. “He tells jokes and is brash. This is like finding out your best friend is royalty.”

Buccaneer hiccuped from joy. “I’m your best friend?”

Olivier and the boys ignored him.

“MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DIE!!!” Ed bellowed. “Can we please focus?”

Millions of people. Millions… It was such a high number that Olivier’s brain couldn’t comprehend it just yet. The country itself wasn’t very densely inhabited, just how maimed would the population be if this took place? If this was allowed to happen? If she didn’t stop it?

Ed finally calmed down, sitting down cross-legged on the ground and studying the map, his frown more prominent now than ever.

“The first of the incidents…” he said.

“What about it?” Olivier asked.

“It happened just after the birth of Amestris,” he said. “In Riviere.”

“Wasn’t that a neighboring country at the time, sir?” Buccaneer asked.

“It was one of the several battles that ensured our country kept growing, yes.”

Ed took a loud breath.

“That’s it, then, isn’t it?” he said. “Look at all these places. The only thing that links them together is that it was the military that carried out the bloodshed. Every time.” His face was ghastly. Olivier’s heart started pounding in her chest. She was already anticipating to the end of his speech, to the culmination of all she’d been trying to find out, and she did not like it in the slightest. It was like finding out after a lifetime of believing in god, that you’d been believing in something false and bleak all this time, that no one was in your corner, that you’d been alone fighting for the wrong causes all along. “We were in Liore before the uprisings, we unmasked the priest and we left everything in peace. It must have been when the soldiers came in that the massacre started. Don’t you see?”

“And what’s more…” Olivier said, her voice heavy. “It was always troops from Central.”

Ed nodded.

“Always annexing one country or the other until we grew,” she continued. “If it’s been going on since 1558, then it was all to create this circle? All in the name of a giant philosopher stone?”

Ed nodded again, he seemed to be at a loss for words.
“Speak, alchemist!”

“Not only are they planning to use the country for their means,” he said, his voice shaking slightly. “But this proves that the country was created for that very means as well.”

“My country,” Olivier grumbled. Amestris, another step in the ladder of someone who planned to climb higher. All those people, all that land, and it was all as fake as the gods Olivier had never believed in. A lie so well concocted no one would have any reason not to trust it, not to live by it. And yet she’d been living in a false country all her life, fighting for someone’s else aspirations, giving her life for a future massacre. She held the hilt of her sword so tightly her knuckles went white.

Everything she had done, every last inch of honor she had found in her job, in her ambitions as a soldier, had turned out to be covered in the blood of the people she had striven to always protect.

Every mile that she had forced to separate her from Central, in the end, had merely been a step. Central had been playing its games for long enough that she’d thought she could outrun them, think herself better than them, keep Briggs safe.

For the first time in a long time, the war against Drachma wasn’t on her mind.

“As far as I can tell, there’s only one place left,” she said, her words gritty with wrath. She kept holding her sword, channeling all her rage in one single motion that would not hurt anyone. Many would be hurt in the future already. “If you’re right about your theory, the next place they’re going to hit is Briggs.”

Her voice went up in pitch in the last few words, and she could not pretend it hadn’t happened out of sheer helplessness. She had hundreds of men in this fort, an entire life built on duty and discipline, and it was about the be destroyed by the men she most despised, by the men she’d endeavored to be better than.

When a few lights seemed to be getting closer to them in the tunnel, they all ignored it. Buccaneer dared place a hand on Olivier’s left shoulder.

“Whatsoever it is they’ve in store for us,” he was telling her, “we’ll show them just how foolish it is to face the northern men during the winter.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy, captain,” Ed said.

As the lights grew closer, Olivier in her distress recognized the features of the men she’d sent away to have some privacy. Now, in retrospective, she regretted that. She wanted everyone to know, even if it wasn’t advisable, she wanted everything to be safe. Now more than ever.

“General,” one of them said, finally reunited with the whole group. “We received word that you’re needed upstairs. Lieutenant General Raven from Central is here to see you.”

Olivier wrinkled her nose. If she’d ever known what was good for her and her people, she knew now more than ever that no one coming from Central at this time, given the circumstances, did so innocently.

“I’ll be right there,” she said. “Be on your way, I’ll follow soon. I’m not done here yet.”

“Yes, general.”

It was only when the men had ridden away once more that Ed sheepishly approached her. There was
nothing of the old insolence in his stance, and Olivier thought he looked so much more like a lost boy like this, so much more like he’d lost too much to still want to keep fighting. She admired that tenacity to go on, regardless.

“Excuse me, general,” the boy said. “I’d like to ask a favor of you, if you don’t mind.”

“Ask away, Fullmetal,” she said, her voice devoid of any emotion.

“Do you think you could con some information out of him?”

She smiled, joyless.

“After what we know now, I didn’t plan to do otherwise.”

Ed exhaled in relief.

“But,” she added, and the boy looked up at her, wondering what the hell she was going to require as a compensation. “I need you to make another opening to the tunnel for me. There’s no telling what Raven will make of it, and my men are still down here.”

Besides, now that Raven has come, I have lost all command of my forces. I will bend to him, whether I like it or not, Olivier thought. What’s left to be seen is if I can have him bend to me as well until he breaks.

“And,” Olivier added. “I need you to promise me you will keep this quiet. To everyone.”

Finally, after a minute of pondering, Edward Elric offered Olivier Armstrong his hand to shake. She took it.

“You know what? I’m getting bored here. I need activity.”

“Another round?”

“So you can win again? No thanks.”

Austin smiled.

“Are you going to go beg for information to men you’ve never talked to?”

“No.”

“You’re a terrible liar, no wonder Olivier doesn’t trust you.”

“She doesn’t trust me because she’s too busy thinking she has to save me.”

“And you’re too busy getting yourself in trouble. You two work like a charm.”

Zinnia smirked.

“I’m going to tell her you said that, you know? She’ll have you doing dishes for a week.”

Austin got his tongue out at her.

“If you find anything new, if you see anything—”
“Yeeees, I’ll tell you. Happy now?”

“Extremely,” she said with a grin. “You’re a true friend, Austin.”

“Where are you even going to go?”

She started walking backwards to look at him.

“I don’t know.” She lifted her arms. “Around! There’s always someone somewhere that’s seen something.”

When she was already leaving, he shouted:

“Do you know how often that person ends up dead?”

But she ignored him.

Her face changed as soon as she was out of the room.

To say that it all had been a way to find out more would have been an understatement. Zinnia didn’t know how she’d been able to pretend for that long. Austin was too good a boy to notice anything, focusing on Zinnia’s apparent thirst for information rather than the sweat on her forehead and the wrinkle in her brow that suggested she was only fishing for data that might contradict the one she already had.

Briggs was at the heart of a plot and no one knew. She wondered if Olivier would at this point, if she even suspected that her precious fort would no longer ever be as safe as it used to be. And all in the midst of the war with Drachma… Zinnia could almost feel that affecting Olivier. It broke her heart, deep down beneath all the worry.

And she knew she should let it rest, heed Olivier’s orders and hide away until this passed, but she felt compelled to keep going, to hear from someone else until there was no one else to ask. To have the whole unadulterated truth.

She headed for the lounge for a coffee or something that would distract her from this when she suddenly spotted the kids being taken away, bodies wrapped in coarse rope, back to their cells by Buccaneer.

Zinnia walked up to him as quickly as she could. Coffee would wait.

“Where’s Olivier?”

“With a visitor,” Buccaneer replied, surprised at her brusqueness. “What are you doing here?”

“Getting coffee. What visitor?”

“Zinnia…” he admonished her, seeing her coming from miles.

With a push, he got the kids to move inside the room and left them on a corner as he found the keys in one of his pockets to open a cell.

Ed didn’t take long to realize this wasn’t a stop in the road.

“Hey,” he yelled. “I thought you were going to free us!”

“You’ll be free when the general contrasts your information with Raven’s.”
Just as rudely as before, Buccaneer maneuvered both kids into the cell and locked it once they were in it without a second thought. Zinnia felt the slam of the metal door like a shot against her chest. Injustice, she thought, or strategy. Whatever they had told Olivier, because they would not have gotten out of the cell otherwise, it needed to be important. And probably more detailed than anything she might have heard from them before. After all, she was just a girlie and Olivier was the general.

“Come on, Zinnia,” Buccaneer said, urging her to leave with him.

She didn’t wait more than a few paces to ask:

“You said she was with a Raven. Raven who?”

Buccaneer paled visibly.

“Tell me.” She shook him by the hem of his uniform.

“I can’t, I’m sorry. The boss said—”

“Not you too, Buc,” she said, dismayed. She hadn’t been shocked at Miles exhibiting this behavior, but she trusted Buccaneer to be true to his gossipy nature and tell her more. “What harm can it do if I know?”

And judging by his stutter, he had been explicitly commanded not to answer that question directly or to dare give way to an information exchange. Zinnia could almost see Olivier making him vow to not let her in on anything that was going on. She tightened her fists.

“None,” he rushed to say. “I just—Disobeying an order like that isn’t… a good idea, you need to understand.”

She knew he was right. Olivier wasn’t the forgiving time too many times in a row, and Buccaneer had already been saved on quite a few occasions.

“Okay, fine, don’t tell me.” She put a hand on his elbow, her energy deflating slowly. There went one more chance to scrap information off of someone who had it. “Off you go, then.”

“Sorry.”

Making sure he was far enough away, Zinnia spun around back into the cell and knelt by the cell where the Elric brothers were.

“And well?” she said. “What happened?”

Ed refused to speak at first, pursing his lips so tight she thought they might fall off. Al, on the other hand, looked about ready to talk but kept quiet out of respect for his brother, who finally, after some moments of silence, broke out of his:

“I expected freedom at this point, that’s what happened.”

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to the general yet.”

“You’ve been wasting time, then.”

“Well, I can’t go right now. She’s with a visitor.” Then Zinnia realized they might know something about this man who had come all the way to Briggs in the dead of winter from the capital. “Who is this Raven, anyway?”
“He’s one of the big shots from Central,” Ed said, a bit reluctantly. “He might be here as… part of the plan we spoke of earlier.”

“And what’s Olivier got to do with it?”

He sighed laconically.

“She’s going to try and get some information out of him, alright? That’s it.”

Zinnia’s hands slid up the bars to wrap around them as she leaned closer to the boys.

“Anything else? Did you get a chance to talk to her in private?”

The two brothers hesitated, remembering the general’s order to keep quiet. They had promised to, and it seemed this girl wasn’t going to help get them out any time soon. Ed chose to lie his way around this, because he wasn’t going to gain anything by speaking a truth that was too appalling and too vast to allow it to spread around just yet.

“She knows we’re legit now. Which is exactly why I don’t understand why we’re still here!” Ed complained. Indeed, it made little sense, they had given the general everything she’d wanted and more than she probably would be able to forget in a long time. Then why were they still in chains? Why was she so intent on making them her prisoners?

Zinnia crossed her arms.

“I don’t know, normally she should’ve let you off the hook. I don’t get it…”

Footsteps echoed outside of the room. She stood up immediately.

“I’ll see what I can do anyway. Goodbye.”

She panicked slightly on her way out, trying not to look too affected in case someone was coming her way and not going somewhere else. When she turned the corner, a shadow the size of a building towered over her.

She forgot to breathe. He was a tall broad man of dark skin and grey hair that had the eyes of a predator. She felt exactly like a pray, caged inside somewhere she couldn’t escape unless he let her.

“Officer,” he told her. It took her a minute to realize he meant her. “Out of my way, please.”

Zinnia appreciated the courtesy, but she was still terrified and did as she was told, getting out of the room altogether. That man had the power to suck the air out of any place he was in, and what was worse, he knew this.

What she met outside was chaos, people running downstairs and upstairs in a disarray that wasn’t typical of the fort and that yet she’d seen too many times in the past few weeks. She followed the trail of activity until she saw the gathering at the hole. A single horse that several men were trying with all their might to control, since it seemed to be heavily upset, was tied to a post nearby and its neighs echoed so loud she should have heard them from the cells.

Zinnia shoved her way in when she saw Olivier speaking to someone on the edge of the hole.

“We tried to radio in, but there’s no contact,” a soldier was telling her, his face affected. Zinnia had to stand on her tiptoes to see.

“Is the animal all that returned?” Olivier asked.
"N-no, sir," he said. He pointed her in the direction of a bloody bundle on a table nearby no one else was anywhere close to. "This did, too."

"And what is it?"

The man went pale. "It’s… Smith’s arm, sir."

Olivier’s face turned just as white as the crowd gasped. Zinnia clasped a hand to her lips. It couldn’t be… Something terrible had to have happened…

"The rest are still missing."

"Very well," Olivier said in her normal voice, despite her face showing she was feeling all but normal. Then she turned to address everyone peeping around her. "Listen up, men! I want twenty volunteers to organize a rescue party for our lost comrades. Whatever’s happened to them, we need to get them out now."

Everyone had eyes on the horse and the arm and they took a step away. It was understandable, at least, that fear reigned over. Zinnia would not have volunteered to get into that hole even if they’d paid her something for her trouble. Danger lurked in, she was sure of it now. They all were.

A new voice arose among the distressed mutters as Raven parted the crowd to get closer to Olivier.

"The tunnel is too dangerous, General Armstrong," he said authoritatively. "What have you done with the monster you mentioned earlier?"

He walked up to her until he was facing her. Zinnia didn’t miss how stiff Olivier looked by his side, stoic as ever, her mouth slightly pursed. She understood, then, that Olivier repudiated his very presence but still had to maintain appearance. This man was as dangerous as the hole the monster had emerged from, and Zinnia knew it as clearly as she knew her own name.

"Put him back and seal the tunnel’s entrances," Raven said as if this would solve everything.

One of the soldiers spoke up:

"But there’s still men in there—"

"I’m speaking to the general!"

Olivier said nothing. Zinnia couldn’t believe it. She would have never been silent before such an affront, something else was going on, something she’d missed. Olivier had been talking to this man and something in that conversation had turned her into a servant to Raven’s will. What she did now would change everything.

"I’ll have him brought to you immediately," she conceded finally. Zinnia’s heart dropped to her feet. This was the most impossible and unbelievable thing she had witnessed in a long time. Olivier would have never turned her back on her men. Not like this. Either Raven had gotten to her, which Zinnia doubted, or she was playing a part… for some reason.

The soldier from before walked up to the generals again:

"Are we really going to abandon our men like this?" His tone was appropriately outraged, but it served him little.

"Quiet!" Olivier yelled. "Be quiet and obey."
She sent a few men to retrieve the monster with the order to thaw him first, and Raven volunteered to accompany them and oversee this personally. Deep down, Zinnia was glad, because when they were all gone, she finally had a chance to approach the scene and slightly touch Olivier’s arm to warn her of her presence.

“Please tell me this is a joke,” Zinnia muttered, trying to be discreet. She had tears in her eyes she hadn’t noticed she’d shed. “Please tell me you’re not abandoning them.”

Olivier looked her cleanly in the eye. It was all effects of touch she would allow with Raven in the vicinity, and Zinnia understood without need for words, even if she failed to understand anything else.

“I’m not,” Olivier whispered back. “Whatever happens, I need you to trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

“But I don’t.”

Now, Olivier’s apparent gentility melted away. She adjusted her gloves, tightening them with obvious contempt.

“Mix with the crowd,” she whispered again. “Don’t let him see you.”

Zinnia grabbed her by the wrist.

“Olivier,” she said. “Just tell me what’s going on. What does this man want?”

With an exasperated but well-disguised sigh, Olivier turned to her now.

“He wants to usurp me,” she muttered. “And for Briggs’ sake I must let him think he has. Now, please, mix with the crowd if you won’t leave.”

Zinnia nodded, and as she moved away Olivier felt her touch slip out of her reach once again. She closed her eyes and readied for Raven’s arrival, which didn’t take long.

Behind him, the men rolled in a platform with the beast in it, a beast that now was fully awake and mumbling.

Raven stood by it and, to everyone’s surprise, spoke to it as he was released into the tunnel. Then he addressed every person in the room, claiming that this beast, so-called Sloth, was a chimera for Central and he was a secret Briggs would have to bring to their graves.

“It’ll take a few days to find the material to cover this up,” Olivier said, after. “Especially in the winter.”

General Raven gifted her with a toothy smile.

“No worries. Everything should go back to normal now.”

He looked, for all intents and purposes, ready to float around Olivier as soon as she stayed here, and she would not move until she saw the last of this Homunculus disappear in the dirt.

With the last of a resolve that she wasn’t sure would last much longer, she yelled at her soldiers:

“Get out of here now.” Her eyes met Zinia’s, hidden away behind taller men, and she remembered to sound, if not kind, lenient. “And don’t make me say it twice.”
You know this is getting long when even I have to keep scrolling for a few minutes in order to find the last sentence XD (very long indeed, around 10k... And don't shoot the messenger, but it is not the longest chapter to come :D)
The cells smelled as warm and impersonal as the last time she’d been in them, not that long ago, although it sure did feel like it had been ages. Now, instead of a spy, she had two allies locked up—and she didn’t hope to get information out of them, just to share it. For the sake of Amestris.

“Do you know why I’m here?” she asked the two boys, who had been staring at her, waiting for her to speak.

“Hopefully, to get us out.” Ed rolled his eyes. “Realistically, to keep us updated.”

“General Raven seemed… willing to divulge much precious information I thought you might be interested in knowing.”

Ed sat up straighter.

“We’re all ears, then.”

“Apparently, what Central is after is a cure for mortality, a way to preserve our bodies as they are.”

Ed made a little disgruntled noise. “What? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Olivier wrinkled her nose. This hadn’t been in her plans when she’d last reviewed the imaginary version of this conversation.

“I thought it might to you.”

Ed immediately leapt to his feet and started pacing in whatever room he had in the cell.

“Did Raven say for whom that immortality was?” he asked.

She figured such a question, asked right after hearing the news, might be of some worth to him, so she strove to answer honestly.

“No,” Olivier said. “Presumably, to the senior staff that’s in on the plan. He offered me a chance at immortality if I joined.”

Ed’s eyes looped around the room to center on her, attentively. “I expect you said yes?”

“I did. It’s the only way to earn enough of his trust so more details will be revealed to us.”

Ed appreciated her use of the plural.

“Fantastic news, general,” he said. “Now, would it be possible to be brought to a room or the floor or anything without chains?”

Olivier stared at him.
“I need you to appear to be my prisoners for the duration of Raven’s stay, if we want the con to work.”

Both kids sighed loudly.

“Shit… so you were going for that, huh?” Ed said after a few seconds of silence.

“We figured it was the most likely thing to have happened when you had us brought back here,” Al elaborated at once, not that she would have needed an explanation. It had become clearer to her the second she had entered the cells that those two kids had done a lot more thinking about the situation than they appeared to. They were waist-deep in on it, so they might as well. And the more she delved into it, the more she realized soon she would be too.

“It’s nothing personal,” Olivier said as if it was, indeed, something personal. Very personal. “It’s just what needs to be done if you want more information.”

“We understand,” Al was quick to say.

“Speaking of information,” Ed interrupted him. “One of your own has come in several times asking questions about Central’s plan.”

Olivier stood up straighter. Her men should have known better than to pry into her business that directly. Which would only mean—

“A girl, tiny and feisty,” Ed continued, unaware of her reaction. “We told her the bulk of it, but nothing concrete.”

Olivier didn’t need to hear more and she really hadn’t needed that last few remarks from the kid, it had become pristinely clear to her the second the word ‘question’ had been uttered: there was only one person in this fort who would dare going to such extremes, because she had no consequences to fear.

“Eventually, I trust all of your soldiers will be told about the plan, if the rumors about your loyalty to them are true,” Ed said. “But in the future, I would recommend controlling your officers to keep them from getting their noses where they don’t belong. For the sake of secrecy.” As if you couldn’t have shut your mouths, kid, Olivier couldn’t help to think. I doubt she put a gun to your head and made you tell her anything. “There could be Central moles everywhere, even here. And you do take in Central soldiers from time to time, don’t you?”

Olivier tightened her fists.

“Believe me, no one on Briggs would ever dream of betraying me.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that…” Ed muttered to himself.

I wouldn’t, either, she thought, too. Zinnia might not have properly betrayed her, but she had gone behind her back all the same.

“Why’d you need me to sit down for? What’s so shocking I need to be on a chair?” Zinnia gasped dramatically. “Are you in love with Miles? Is Buccaneer in love with Miles? Have the kids run away? Are you pregnant? Are you pregnant and it’s not mine?”
Olivier rolled her eyes for a full ten seconds.

“I assume you’re not pregnant?” Zinnia half-muttered.

“Just sit down. Be a good girl.”

Zinnia smirked at how she’d been addressed but did as she was told. She was, indeed, a very good girl. Not better than Olivier herself, but still very good.

“What exactly do you know about what’s happened and how have you come across that information?” Olivier said.

“Just that the kids have been through some shit, and that they found out there’s a plot in Central to do something, although they’re not sure yet why or how much involvement there is in what’s happening in the north.”

“And the kids told you?”

“I asked them to.”

Olivier facepalmed. “Zinnia.”

“Look, I know you don’t like it, but I refuse to sit down somewhere warm and nice and let whatever’s coming smash me against the ground when I can amass the right information in time to know to move aside and dodge it.”

“It’s nothing that concerns you,” Olivier said, losing her patience.

Zinnia wrinkled her face. “I think it concerns me a little.”

Olivier groaned.

“Okay, fine. What else do you know?”

“Nothing else. They omitted details. I was hoping they would tell you—”

Olivier’s face turned white as snow.

“—and that then it would seep on to Miles or Buc or someone I could ask.”

“I see…”

“But then this Raven showed up. And no one is saying anything again. It’s like… like the kids have been forced to keep silent about more.”

Olivier ignored that, mostly because it was very true.

“Raven is from Central. He’s a rank above me,” she said as calmly as she was able to muster. “I’m going to use him to try and find out what else is there that we haven’t been able to guess so far.”

Zinnia crossed her legs and dusted something off her kneecap as if her entire life depended on that.

“Is that wise?” she asked meanwhile.

“I don’t know that it is. But if my fort’s involved in any way in this, I have a right to know. I have people to defend.”
She hadn’t said ‘to care for’, and she wouldn’t have needed to. The subtext was pretty clear for Zinnia. Plus, she imagined there had to be something else. So far, the only involvement the fort had had was that it was being the new scenario for the weirdest things happening, but if she was talking about war plans, only Drachma’s threat loomed ahead, not Central’s. Or did it? Had Zinnia missed something?

Olivier had been oddly secretive about letting on any details regarding the recent incidents, details that the Elric brothers had omitted as well or plainly refused to share. Zinnia suspected Olivier might have talked to them, threatened them so they would keep any new information to themselves. And Zinnia feared there would be no talking people into divulging that, since so very few knew.

“Raven’s the closest link I have to Central right now,” Olivier insisted. “And he’s right here, ready for me to exploit at my leisure.”

“I doubt he’d let you exploit him…” Zinnia muttered, half-teasing.

“I do plan on being subtle. Men like him usually handle delicate bits of information, but they’re weak.” She spoke the word so angrily. “If you play them well enough, they confide quickly.”

Zinnia smiled lopsidedly, cocked her head, then said:

“Is he the one who provided you with those secret details?”

Olivier nodded. “And more to come.”

“And how exactly are you playing him?”

Olivier sighed. She had imagined this would be a question Zinnia would eventually ask. After all, Zinnia had been spying around the fort, trying to find the truth out for herself. It was obvious that she had come to that conclusion.

Images of Raven’s face too close for comfort flooded Olivier’s brain, as did the foul stench of his breath, the sickly warmth of his body across the table… She forced herself to shiver, to shake it all away.

“By any means necessary,” she replied without looking away from Zinnia’s eyes. They both knew what that meant, and neither made a move for several seconds. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. In his eyes, I’m an old spinster who wishes for a husband and a better body.”

“Better than that?” Zinnia muttered.

Olivier ignored her, despite wanting very much to return the flattery and let herself dwell on silly things like those instead of something else, the something that had been sitting on her chest, cutting her breath in half, for days now.

“He thinks he can easily manipulate me, earn my trust through granting my wishes. And it needs to stay that way.” She didn’t mention that, aside from maintaining the lie, it was paramount to her that Zinnia stayed in the background of all of this, in case whatever she feared could happen did and the fort was raided or she was found out and Zinnia, most beloved to her, was used against her. She would fight with tooth and nail to keep that situation from happening, if it was the last thing she did.

“So we can’t be seen together. You can’t come up to me, you can’t sit with me, you can’t… you can’t exit this room at the same time as me.”

She uttered those words so sadly she thought her heart was going to break. This was receding to the very beginning, when they had denied everything that held them together in the hope that neither
would admit to it happening, in the hope that no one saw.

“You need me to be one more here,” Zinnia said, understanding.

“If Central found out,” Olivier tried to explain, “they have enough power to do the unimaginable. And I fear they would do it to me by means of… hurting you.” The thought alone could have brought tears to her eyes. “I can’t let that happen and I won’t. I will do whatever it takes.”

Zinnia looked down at her hands. What it meant for her to have to do this could not be spoken. She had fought so much, including herself, to stand in this room proudly, to feel at ease with Olivier next to her, to know that wanting and loving her was not something forbidden, something dark and unseemly and impossible. And now she needed all her process to be shattered for the sake of her own protection, because Olivier herself was asking her to. It hurt. It reminded her just how frail this thing between them could be, if seen through the right lens.

Then Olivier said something she didn’t say often.

“I’m sorry.”

Zinnia smiled softly, leaving her chair to walk next to her and hold her hand in hers.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not the only thing I’ll have to apologize for in these next days,” Olivier admitted, looking her in the eye, and feeling guiltier for each word that left her mouth. “I’ll have to spend most of my time with Raven. He’ll tell me more and more about his plans the more I convince him I am who he thinks me to be. And, unfortunately, that requires time.”

“I understand, Olivier, really. You don’t need to give me a speech about it.”

“Still, I want to,” she replied. “I… I fear I may have made you feel a bit discarded lately, with everything that’s been going on. Ever since we came back.”

Zinnia didn’t look away, but she didn’t say anything either.

“Your silence confirms it.”

“I’m not the priority here,” Zinnia said, her voice soft and calm, but thick with something Olivier couldn’t put her finger on. “And I agree I can’t be. There’s too much at stake.”

Still, Olivier said, firmly as if she was giving the men a pep talk:

“It doesn’t change anything between us. It won’t make me feel any less like you just threw me to the ground and put a boot to my chest.”

Zinnia chuckled a little at that.

Olivier tipped Zinnia’s chin upwards and muttered softly:

“You’re still the girl that made me run.”

“You’re still the girl that almost made me run away,” Zinnia replied humorously. Then she added, more seriously: “Because she was too everything for a town girl like me.”

“Way to ruin the moment.”
“Who said it was ruined?”

And Zinnia hovered there, right below Olivier’s lips, for what felt like an eternity. And, in a way, it did take her an eternity of moving upward, inch by inch, until she breached the distance.

It was a stolen kiss, and it would be the last they indulged in in public spaces for some time. Zinnia knew this, she knew the priority was saving the fort and the men in it, she knew Olivier needed her head and heart somewhere else now, and she gathered all the patience and understanding she had and threw them at the voices in her head that contradicted Olivier’s promise that nothing important would really change.

“It’ll just be for a couple of days…” Olivier murmured, mostly to Zinnia and truthfully to convince herself that it would be so.

“How long it is…” Zinnia said in the same tone. “Don’t forget who your real friends are. Don’t forget what you fight for.”

“In fifteen years you’d think I would have forgotten already,” Olivier said. “Thankfully, I’ve always known where I stand. And who I stand there with.”

Raven personified everything Olivier hated about Central. When he sat down for lunches, he expected the whole table to stand up so he could eat alone with her; he spoke of the other provinces as if they were lesser than and they were to always be under Central’s rule; and he treated Olivier, thinking her a poor woman unable to handle living in a world of men, with extreme delicacy, as if he didn’t consider the idea that she might be an equal, capable of withstanding more than most.

During the affluence of hours she was forced to stay in his shadow, Olivier grew to perceive his cunningness as pedantic and absurd, which he probably thought was inscrutable and pristine, and she wondered how on earth they had let this man join the senior staff. He had the common sense of an overenthusiastic child playing at war in the courtyard. He spoke of his plans too easily, as if there weren’t soldiers around, as if he didn’t suspect for one second that Olivier had to bite her tongue every minute she spent with him, aching to stab him with something and teach him the Briggs’ way as her face muscles hurt because of her forced smiling.

Instead, she bore with a poise she’d thought long forgotten in the times when she’d still lived with her parents. And she devoted every silent minute listening to Raven exalting his country, his people, and himself to planning her next move. She couldn’t go on like this, letting Central slowly take control of the one thing in life she still felt she could hold dear. She couldn’t let them win, not for as long as she was still alive. And, so far, having proven to Raven how useful she could be, her life would last long enough to put her plans to work.

One morning, she gathered Miles and Buccaneer in her office at the crack of dawn, before Raven himself would think of getting up. She quietened their muffled complaints about the hour with her usual bluntness. She hadn’t come here to play games, after all.

“I’m going to kill Raven,” she just said.

Their jaws dropped almost all the way to the floor. Miles gathered his composure much quickly than Buccaneer.

“I beg your pardon?”
“You heard me. This has gone on long enough. I know what I need to know to get rid of him safely, without that affecting our plans.”

“Which are?” Buccaneer asked. “Because as far as I was informed, killing the general was not part of those plans.”

“Plans change,” she insisted. “There’s not much more I can get out of him before he suspects me. What I want to know lies in the heart of the capital. The only way we have of fully gaining access to what’s truly going on in our country is to infiltrate Central Command.” She paused. “And, unfortunately, I need to be in Central for that.”

“It wouldn’t necessarily need to be you,” Miles pitched in, finally recovered from the shock. “Any of us would gladly take the challenge.”

“It will be me,” Olivier asserted quietly. “Raven and his people already believe I’m on their side. Has Kimblee fallen for it as well, Miles?”

She looked at him. He cleared his throat.

“He might have… teased about it several times, but I don’t think he’s up to date.”

“Good,” she said. “I want you on him at all times. He can’t find out about Raven’s demise at first, so we can sell it to him as a disappearance.”

“What do you mean, at first?” Buccaneer asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said. “If I want to get myself to Central, the senior staff needs to have been alerted of Raven’s ‘disappearance’ coincidentally happening after his arrival on Briggs. Whatever few brains they have left, I don’t think it will take them long to send for me so I can be questioned.”

“They might choose to do it here instead of taking you to Central,” Miles said.

She shook her head.

“Trust me, if a big shot like Raven goes missing under such suspicious circumstances, the Führer himself will want to oversee the case,” she said. “And I’ll be there to handle the information exchange.”

“Absolutely not,” Miles said, crossing his arms. She wanted to abandon her entire life to go into what was practically enemy territory to spy on the senior staff, and she wanted to go alone. Miles couldn’t tolerate something like this happening when he himself was ready to volunteer. If there was something he knew the entire fort would agree with, that was that they could not be rid of Olivier Armstrong and hope to win anything—and, even though people seemed to have forgotten, Drachma continued to move forward in their schemes to reach Briggs. He looked at Buccaneer, who assisted him:

“It’s too dangerous, boss.”

It shocked them to see her smile softly at their displays of genuine affection hidden beneath the layers of defiance.

“I know Bradley. I know how to play men like him. If I give him just enough, I might end up in Raven’s post.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” Miles asked, ever the wise one, after some silence.
“If it doesn’t work,” she said, then she looked up at the two of them. Her second-in-command, her trusted allies in this fight that no one could win and the ones that had come before her, her family. She would be sad to leave them, and she would fear for them, alone when Drachma’s attack could not be closer. “Then it’s been a pleasure serving with you.”

The supplies arrived not long after that, and the whole fort united to patch up the hole on their floor. They were days of construction and sweat, and several patrols had to be cancelled at Raven’s request, so the hole had priority. Olivier said nothing, she had found this to be her best shot at keeping appearances if she wanted Raven to believe she was nothing but a frail flower of the north. Quite frankly, she only attributed not having been found out to Raven’s own self-centeredness. If he hadn’t been as preoccupied with courting her (terribly), then perhaps he might have noticed that the frowns on her face and the paleness on her knuckles seemed to be a more and more frequent occurrence.

But Olivier bid her time well, like she always had.

On the day that it happened, she was accompanied by Buccaneer and some more men to oversee the final cementing of the hole, the last step in covering up a mess that a Homunculus from Central had started. If only doing that could mean that everything would go back to normal, but instead normal had receded back into ancient times and Olivier was alone against a tidal wave. She felt that it would swallow her whole, even if she planned to stand up to it until it destroyed her completely.

“It pleases me greatly to see that things are finally going as they should.”

“And why is that, general?” Olivier asked.

“The stronger survive, just like you say here in Briggs. The weak pave our way.”

_Call my soldiers and the innocent people of this country weak one more time, Raven_, she thought as she rubbed the hilt of her sword as subtly as she could. But she comported herself. It wasn’t time yet.

“Just like in Ishval, and many other places before that. History repeats itself, and the ones on top are the ones to make it.”

“This is what happened in Ishval?” she asked. It had been on the Elric boy’s slapdash map, of course, but the thought that the greatest war in centuries had all been for the creation of a philosopher stone and the continuation of some great plans hurt her beyond her own understanding. It was a war that, after all, concerned her on two different fronts. “Was it all to ennoble the strong?”

Ishval. Where the last great war of the century had been waged, where lives had been lost and souls had been ripped violently from their bodies, where her brother’s true nature had emerged from the ashes, even if she had never understood. Now that she _tried_ to, for Zinnia, she could almost see it, the battlefield in the sand with the ever-straight lines of attack of Amestris—the alchemists getting ready to burn the territory to the ground—and hundreds of children getting caught in the flames. She asked herself now if she would have been able to press on knowing that, if she would have been able to follow her orders while aware that these were people with families she might destroy. Families like Zinnia’s.

Olivier clenched her fist on the hilt of the sword. Those deaths should have been on her instead of Alex, instead of people like Mustang and his people in Eastern Command; at least she would have known what to do with the guilt. The extremes the military asked of her had never been a problem for her, because her heart had been long dead for many years, and the last breaths of life in it would

have died accordingly in the remorse of the war. It wouldn’t have just been murder, it would have been suicide.

“Certainly,” Raven replied. “Ishval is the best example you could have chosen to dwell on, miss Olivier.”

She flinched at the honorific, wanting to rip Raven’s tongue an inch at a time for daring to pronounce it so close to her name.

“And how long has it been going on for, this… plan of yours?” she asked, trying to be discreet, although she knew Raven would have no problem discussing this in front of her men, as if they didn’t exist, as if they were so empty in the head they might not retain what they heard. She repudiated him with all her heart, a man with all the chances in the world to do good, to be someone, and yet he was throwing them all away because some wanna-be god had promised him eternal life.

There is no such thing, she thought. Immortality’s just a tale we tell ourselves in order to keep on living. Hoping to attain it is such a stupid reason to do anything.

“As far as I know, Amestris itself is the nation of future immortality, built for that very purpose.” He had the nerve to smile. Olivier almost struck him down, then. Almost. “And we will be the ones to reach glory because of it.”

He put a hand on her shoulder and she winced—she couldn’t help it this once, she hadn’t seen it coming—but he didn’t move away even then. He must’ve thought he had the right to make her uncomfortable, even if it was clear that, for whatever reason, she did not want to be touched by the likes of him.

“I know you have personal reasons to dislike what happened in Ishval,” he continued. “After all, wasn’t your brother in the war?” When he received no reply, he pressed on: “Well, never mind. It will all have been worth it when we rise as the better men, don’t you think?” He chuckled. “Ishval will have been worth it.”

Now, she thought. Her hand moved faster than she had willed it to, unsheathing a sword that had been buried for too long and stabbing it through Raven’s left forearm with the strength Olivier hadn’t shown off in years. Now, she felt in her element.

She faced him just as he gasped, understanding that the woman he’d thought he was with had never been there in the first place.

“Ishval should have been left alone. The whole territory this country has been built on should have remained where it was, general. We are born from a farce, and I am going to undo it just as easily as I am going to slice you up.”

Instead of moaning in pain, Raven tried to get away until he felt the agony of his open wound with the sword still in it, piercing his arm from front to back.

She tsked.

“Going anywhere, Raven?” she said. “Afraid of dying? It’s truly terrifying, isn’t it? You would know, general. Before you became so afraid of your own mortality, I’m sure long ago you had an earnest love for your country.”

His eyes swelled with the realization that this was no ruse, that there was not a single grain of uncertainty in General Armstrong’s ice-cold eyes, that these were, regrettably, his last moments. He still tried to persuade her, though, with methods so pitiable that Olivier almost dropped the sword and
locked him up to laugh at him for the eternity he so wished for.

“You—you can’t. You were going to be one of the chosen ones. You would’ve been one of us.”

She clenched her jaw. Too long, he had already lived too long. He had caused too much suffering, his plans would have been catastrophic. It needed to be done now.

With her other hand, she grabbed the collar of Raven’s clothes and lifted him from the ground effortlessly.

“I don’t need a new seat from you. You’re going to lose the one your moldy ass has been clinging to for too long.” Olivier extracted the sword from his arm and wielded it at him, lunging forward to cut him down. “Right about now, Raven!” She hacked him with her sword so angrily that despite the layers of clothing he was wearing she managed to make him bleed. “You old traitor!”

Raven fell and he kept falling and the concrete, still wet, encased him like a blanket after a freezing day. Seeing him acknowledge the situation and still fighting desperately for any one of the staring soldiers to give him a hand out of there was truly one of the most exhilarating moments of Olivier’s life.

His breath had almost left him and yet he still tried, he still saw in her a woman to be conquered, not a conqueror. And, ultimately, that was his mistake.

“But immortality… was right before … our eyes,” he said, the concrete now covering all of him except a face that sank farther down every second.

“General, you are among the weak who will become the foundation for this country. Literally,” she saw, cleaning her sword with one of her gloves.

Finally, she stared at Raven as his last seconds expired and he was swallowed by the concrete he himself had ordered to be spread over the hole. He was drowning in the spot where he’d planned for hundreds to die, and it was fitting, so very fitting, that he had died in their place.

Buccaneer, behind her, cleared his throat.

“General?”

He took a few steps forward and handed her a pair of new gloves. For a moment, she hesitated. Perhaps Miles should have been here to see this instead of him. Buccaneer had a heart of gold and he worried more than he let on, and now having been witness to this he would probably doubt of his ability to keep quiet about it in the future. And she would need him to. Every last one of them, in fact.

“Find Miles and come to my office,” she said to him as privately as she could.

Then she grabbed the gloves and put them on.

“I want that concrete nice and level,” she said to the room at large before she strutted away like there was nothing to see here.

“Hey, I was looking for you,” Zinnia said. “Where’s everyone?”

Buccaneer looked away while simultaneously trying to make eye contact, so it wouldn’t look like he
was hiding something.

“Fixing the hole. Filling it up with cement and the like. Why?”

“No reason. It was just really weird to see no one around. I thought there might be some secret meeting I was none the wiser to.” She inspected him more closely. “Is something wrong? You’re blue in the face.”

He looked around as if he feared Olivier herself was behind him, lurking.

“General Raven’s dead.” He vowed to himself he wouldn’t start yapping about the plan. It was something that so far Olivier had been very clear that she only wanted him and Miles to know, and this time he would not be the gossip he wanted to be, he would keep his trap shut.

“Wait, what?” Zinnia said, not fully processing it yet. “What do you mean he’s dead? How can he be dead? Did he fall into the pool of cement or something?”

“Something like that…” he said. “Olivier did it. You’d, uh, find out sooner or later, that’s why I’m telling you, yeah.”

But Zinnia wasn’t paying attention to his poor excuses.

For some time now she’d liked to think she knew just how far Olivier would go, what lines she was absolutely ready to cross for her people and what would always remain in an unthinkable limbo. Stories had reached her—stories of the war—and Zinnia had accepted the fact that in war people resorted to more than just diplomacy and defense. She’d accepted the fact that Olivier might have fired lethal shots under someone else’s command, that at the end of the day Olivier had lied and broken rules to be where she was.

This was, on the contrary, a death out of nowhere, cold-blooded murder. And whichever way it’d happened, Zinnia couldn’t breathe when she thought of Olivier delivering the final blow. Raven was a filthy old man, too used to power, and he’d certainly come from Central with wicked plans to follow through, but Zinnia could not have been able to foresee this, and if someone had come bearing the truth of this future, she wouldn’t have believed it.

Deep down, maybe, she refused to come to terms with the fact that Olivier was capable of such a thing. It was something she’d never even considered might be in Olivier’s heart. Not in normal circumstances, anyway. And these, even if it came to be poor consolation for Zinnia, definitely were not normal.

“How—how did it happen?”

“Hard to say,” he said. “There were a few factors involved.”

“Is Olivier okay? Did he hurt her?”

Buccaneer shook his head.

“It wasn’t a matched fight,” he said. “She butchered him.” Zinnia was about to ask more, heart pounding in her chest, when he shook his head again. “Anyway, I need to be off. She’s waiting for Miles and me in her office, and he’s nowhere to be seen.”

“He’s…” she said, finding her voice strange, as if discombobulated, “he’s with Kimblee.”

“Thanks, kid,” Buccaneer said. “See ya.”
He disappeared from the corner of her eye and she didn’t realize it. She would have missed an elephant strutting around. Something held her senses at a distance from her brain, and whatever she perceived from the world came to her in bits and pieces, in a blur. Olivier had killed Raven out of nowhere, a man who had come as a visitor with whatever muddy intentions and who Zinnia had been under the impression Olivier needed to extract more information from. What could have possibly motivated her to do this? Could it be she’d finally run out of patience? Olivier was known for her temper and little resilience to opposition, could she have exploded and, in a fit, have ended the life of the general? Or did she have any reason to have killed him?

Zinnia leaned against a wall, a little breathless. It made no sense. None of it did. She hadn’t thought Olivier capable of this, she hadn’t thought she’d ever have to stomach it.

She closed her eyes and tried to still her breathing. It all was alright, she hadn’t been the one to commit the crime, she was safe. And yet she began to tremble like a fawn in the dark of the cold forest. Because Olivier wouldn’t be safe. And because her heart must be icy behind the kindness she sported towards her men, otherwise she wouldn’t have killed. She would have gotten her way like she always did, but she would’ve done so cleanly.

Now a murder had come to be in the fort. What would Olivier tell the men? Would Olivier even tell Zinnia? Or would this be another one of those things that piled up in the ridge between them to never be spoken of again?

Zinnia needed to know why this murder was a reality. She needed answers to her many questions. It may well have been the only variable in this that remained the same: her need to have the answers, her need to prepare for the present and the future as long as she still could.

Olivier had killed, and Zinnia’s heart might never recover from knowing it was true, but now she just had to find out why. She hoped, against all odds, that this ‘why’ would help her feel less like Olivier was playing at a dangerous game Zinnia had never signed up for, a little less like Olivier was and had always been the mountain at the border that causes avalanches to keep the Drachman away.

Kimblee sat across her in her office, legs up on her desk as if he owned it and she wasn’t right there to see it.

“So, word has it General Raven is missing…”

“‘Word’ would have it correctly.”

He leaned forward conspicuously and asked:

“What did you do to him, Armstrong?”

“Let him loose on a place where anyone could easily get lost.”

“Don’t play games with me, general. We both know that’s not true.”

“Whatever it is, it’s not in your power to decide.

Kimblee uncrossed his legs and put them down.

“I’ve already alerted the authorities, by the way.”
I am the authority, you cockroach, Olivier thought to herself.

“Surely, this place will soon be filled with the enemy, right, general? And what will you do, then?” he continued.

“You misjudge me if you think I won’t do everything in my power to find General Raven.”

He studied her long and hard. She wondered what he could possibly see in her expression and whether any of his impressions of her would be correct. As it turned out, men tended to see in her what they themselves projected upon her. For a moment, she even felt curious about what a man like Kimblee might see there.

After a few seconds, he rested his back against the chair.

“Perhaps you’re not as much of an idiot as you’re said to be.” The fact that he meant it as a compliment made her blood boil. This man knew nothing, he was barely scratching the surface of how cunning Olivier could grow to be. He took a deep breath. “Never mind Raven now. My assailant, Scar, has been finally tracked. He’s moving south.” She made no response. “I see you don’t care.”

“Why would I?”

He smirked and it was disgusting. She could smell his breath from here, she could hear the echoes of the deaths he had caused.

“Because I’m taking your sweet little prisoners with me.” His smirk grew more pronounced. “Didn’t expect that, did you? I’ve managed to talk to them a couple of times when your… adjutant was busy elsewhere. They’re as interested in hunting Scar as I am, posed no problem about coming with me.”

“That is, if I allow them to. Don’t forget they are, as you well have said, my prisoners.”

He made a pity face.

“And won’t you let them come with me? I promise to take good care of them.”

She tightened her fist. Those kids were her only witnesses to Central’s plot, she needed them alive and close.

“What could you possibly gain from taking them?”

“Unnerving you, of course. Who can say they’ve crossed the Northern Wall of Briggs and lived to tell the tale?”

She growled, but he was right. She was tongue-tied, hands bound to her back. All she could do was keep standing, be the wall everyone had always wanted her to be.

“Careful, Kimblee,” she hissed.

He got comfortable on his chair.

“Careful of what, lady? You’re not going to touch me, are you? One more death and you’d go down.” He tutted. “And we can’t let that happen, can we? You need to stand your ground. You can’t stop me.” He grinned at the realization.

And she knew how true that was, although it wasn’t the last card she could play with in the game. She still had a few aces up her sleeve. All in due time, she reminded herself.
“Stopping you?” she said, mockingly. “I can do much better than that.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing that come true.”

“Likewise.”

“And now, if you’ll excuse me… I’ve played with you enough and I’m bored. I need my new toys.”

She dared to ask one question.

“When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow at the latest. You’ll have your precious fort back by then.” He walked towards the door, then turned around partially with a smug smile on his lips. “For a while, anyway.”

Olivier slammed her fist on the table only when he was finally gone. She felt she was losing on too many fronts now to even call this a proper conflict. It was just a conquest. And she was the conquered instead of the conqueror this time.

It had been too long a day, too long a week, too long a month, and it was only the first one of twelve. Olivier didn’t know how much longer this was going to go on, but she feared it wouldn’t end with January. At the end of January, they might be in war already with Drachma and she’d be torn between the war she’d craved since she was practically a child and the war that now she felt compelled to fight because it endangered everything she had always believed in. Perhaps it was a little selfish, yet she’d already started to make sacrifices to be sure her side would win the war against Central, against a power no one could even name, let alone fully describe.

It was going to be a long year.

One part of her knew she wasn’t likely to emerge from the fighting alive. She was who she was, and that would probably turn her into a target for both her enemies. A target with possibilities, a target with notorious skills, but a target nonetheless. That was easier to bring down than just any object in the battlefield, it was more easily identifiable.

If she lived, she’d be forced to pick up the pieces of whatever was left. Perhaps the fort would be blown up, perhaps many of her men would die, perhaps there wouldn’t be any north to come back to if they lost, if Drachma took over. Despite of the anger that normally boiled inside her at the thought of that, today Olivier could hardly feel it arise. All she had was this feeling, like no matter what she did the dice had been thrown already; their destinies were already set on a course, and whatever she did she would not evade it. It weakened her more than actual warfare had. And she knew life was pouring out of her just as joyfully as her enemies’ plans advanced.

But she had to go on. If anything, she would live on out of spite. And the fact that for the first time in fifteen years she was not alone. She had someone she wanted to protect more than herself, someone whose life she wouldn’t allow to pour out, no matter the cost. Even if lately all Olivier had seen of her was her sleeping silhouette on their bed, a flash of brown hair turning a corner.

She’d learned to repress the grief in her heart at those images, she’d learned to focus on Raven and the next step, and she’d forgotten just how much it hurt to arrive to her room at night and find Zinnia had already fallen asleep. But, in a way, she was thankful. If Zinnia had been awake any of those last few nights, Olivier couldn’t be too sure that she wouldn’t have told her everything, if only to feel less alone, if only to share a burden that should have been Olivier’s alone, selfish as that was.

She turned the knob expecting to find that very same thing one more night, ready to just about get into bed without even changing clothes and letting whatever few hours of sleep she could get make
her forget how crucial it was that she was at her best at a time when she could hardly say she was.

“You’re awake.”

“You’re here early,” Zinnia noted, and Olivier conceded.

For once, she hadn’t let herself get detained elsewhere. She had come to the only place where she didn’t need to do anything but just exist, dwell on the struggles and virtues of the human condition.

“I guess I am. Does it surprise you?”

She drove the tension out of her, not realizing that said tension was only meeting a mountain of it that had been piling up in their room for days.

Zinnia sat demurely on the bed beside a pile of clothes. She had a long-sleeved t-shirt on her lap and she was folding it with all the care in the world, so very slowly, as if she didn’t mind to just spend the time like this.

“I wasn’t expecting it. But… after what I heard today, I don’t think anything else can surprise me.”

Olivier played the idiot because she had no more ideas. The tension was there, staring her right in the eye instead of Zinnia, burning and gnawing at her skin to just delve into this, get it all over with. What she had done, eventually Zinnia would find out why and how. Perhaps she even knew the full of it now. Lately, Olivier visualized no limit for Zinnia’s quest for answers.

“What did you hear?” she asked her now, tentatively. Depending on Zinnia’s answer to that, Olivier would mold her own telling of what had happened. She hadn’t stopped to think, not for one minute, that this would shape their relationship in any way. She hadn’t had time, really, to ponder anything like that. All she’d thought about was the plan, her own and Central’s, and Raven’s foul personality.

Zinnia turned around suddenly to meet her eye, giving up on the folding of the sleeves.

“You know perfectly well what I heard. And you know perfectly well why it would affect me.”

“It shouldn’t,” Olivier replied, aware as Zinnia was saying, that it indeed always would.

Zinnia gave up probing her. Olivier was stubborn if she was anything, too proud to tell the truth without twisting it at first, even if later on it would just pour out of her.

“Did you seriously kill Raven?”

Olivier held her gaze for a second. How did one answer that? With honesty? With a joke? Should she even answer it if Zinnia already knew? Wasn’t this just beating around the bush?

“Yes.”

Zinnia suddenly seemed as if she was holding back tears. She could have been for the whole time, Olivier wouldn’t have noticed.

“So it’s true, then.” Zinnia’s eyes had gone back to the sleeve she was folding, and she bit her lip. And Olivier didn’t know whether to fall into grief and disappointment with her or to rise above it like she had learned to do. Death was something that soldiers needed teaching from the first day; she had seen soldiers shot for insubordination, men die at the front lines, generals sacrifice their lives. Death happened, and sometimes it happened because of her. Lately, more often than just sometimes. “You killed a man.”
And now that Olivier understood, she couldn’t help but smile faintly. So this was what was haunting her flower girl, what she thought was a spot of thick blood on Olivier’s pristine gloves. She wanted to sit next to Zinnia, cradle her in her lap and tell her, ‘oh, child, if you knew… you wouldn’t be crying for me now. My heart was blackened, turned to stone a long time ago. Long before you could come to its rescue.’

Instead, all the emotion in Olivier’s body concentrated in the power of her eyes as she pierced Zinnia’s with a stoicism she was not feeling today.

“He’s not my first.”

“Will he be your last?” Zinnia managed to ask, as nobly as she could with tears beginning to fall from her face and splotching the shirt she was trying to fold. She had known Olivier’s record wasn’t clean, no one lived through a war without having to kill for their own side.

Olivier shook her head, then realized Zinnia wasn’t looking at her and actually voiced her negative: “No.”

“I don’t know if I can live with this,” Zinnia confessed in a shaky voice.

“I kill a man and you’re the one who can’t live with it?” Olivier said, trying to make it sound like a joke. It came off too tense. She had never been skilled at good-humored jokes, her touch was always a little too sharp and edgy for everyone’s taste.

“Would you be able to love me if I’d killed?”

“So that’s it? You don’t love me anymore.” The acidity in Olivier’s words stung.

Zinnia tried to hold her gaze but couldn’t.

“I can’t just turn that off…”

“Yes, you can. You can take off, which is almost the same.”

There it was, dancing in midair like a death sentence before it is passed. You can take off, Zinnia heard from the woman who had chased her across an entire fort once to make her not leave. She could take off, she could call Candie again and seek refuge in her second residence in North City, she could run like she’d always done and find herself somewhere far from the north, but she’d be damned if she was asked to let this go before it was time. She would know when it was. She didn’t know that the moment was now.

“I’m not going to take off,” Zinnia muttered. “I have every intention of seeing… whatever this is through. But today I don’t think I can even look you in the eye for longer than five seconds.”

“Scared it’ll rub off on you?”

Zinnia finally looked up at her, snot running down her nose as she cried silently.

“Can you stop being an asshole about it?” she almost yelled. “Whatever’s going on that you’re not telling me, killing Raven’s made it worse, hasn’t it?

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Zinnia replied. “If nothing’s going on, then why was there a monster under our ground? How did your men get lost there? Why is there a dead man buried in concrete? Why do you
flee so you can talk to those kids? I’m not an idiot, Olivier. These kids, that monster, now General Raven is dead… What’s happening?” Olivier continued to say nothing. “Are you really willing to leave me in the dark?”

Olivier tsked. “You already know some things.”

Zinnia urghed. Olivier was still standing in the middle of the room like a very uncomfortable introvert at a formal party.

“I know nothing that really matters. That we’re in danger. That this somehow is a plot and we’re right in the middle of it. But I don’t know who’s in charge of this, and I don’t know who to trust or who to ask, because no one is going to tell me anything.”

The frustration in Zinnia’s voice, although worn old and thin from having witnessed it so many times, forced Olivier to think that she might as well just say something. If only to get her off my back, she thought—an excuse.

“We’re the last step of a plot, yes. Briggs will fall prey to bloodshed,” Olivier said, furious at the thought that very soon maybe nothing that she knew and loved about this place would still stand. “And no matter what I do, that’s done. But …” She hated to say this. “Right now there’s something bigger going on. That’s why I killed the general. To infiltrate the higher ranks, know what they’re saying.”

Zinnia threw her hands up in the air. “Great way to infiltrate anywhere, be an ally who kills other allies.”

“He said things I will allow for no one to say in this fort.” Not after what I’ve learned. What you made me see. “Even if they are true.”

Besides, she’d needed to arouse suspicion in Central so they’d come for her.

Zinnia held her head in her hands, hunched down a little.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was coming here to tell you.”

“No, I mean before.”

Olivier didn’t waver. To Zinnia, there would have to be no ‘before’.

“I didn’t plan this.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Zinnia said, shaking her head slowly. It was the last thing she needed right now, for Olivier to concoct another one of her protective lies and go on with her plans without counting on her. “Not now.”

You’ve lied to me from the beginning.

And yet, Zinnia had no intention of taking off, as Olivier had put it. Even if she willed herself to, she still didn’t want to. She preferred, selfishly, absurdly, to sit down and talk to a murderer that kept murdering. Whatever Raven had been, however much of a bad guy, killing didn’t have to be the way.

Finally, Olivier moved. She very carefully covered the space between where she was and the bed
and sat down. It was clear that this was one of those moments that she couldn’t pretend were meaningless. She couldn’t come up with a single second of the past couple of days that hadn’t been meaningless. Every step counted, and every step was another chance to fuck it all up and endanger so many more people…

“He needed to die,” she finally said quietly. “In order for this place to remain safe, for my plans to work.”

“So that means you’ll soon be working with Central?”

Olivier didn’t mention that she would be doing more than just working with them.

“Couldn’t you just… have continued with your seduction?”

Olivier almost choked.

“I wasn’t seducing him.”

“Did you have to kill him, is what I’m asking.”

“Probably not. But if I’d kept him prisoner, he might have escaped or, if Central had come here to investigate with him still alive, he might have made contact with them. Killing solved that problem.”

“And what is it that you’re going to do now? What’s next?” Zinnia asked, wiping her tears off her face. Perhaps if she delved deep enough into this, she might understand Olivier’s motives and be able to look at her again and see something more than Raven’s blood on her face. “What does this allow you to do?”

Olivier sighed.

“Right now, I’m the last person who saw Raven alive. I have an army, hostages, and Raven’s information. If I play my cards right, his disappearance and my collaboration in finding him might improve my relations with Central and I might find out what they’re hiding.”

All in the name of protection, again. Information might keep Briggs safe if they could anticipate to whatever was going to happen. And Olivier took it as far as a human being possibly could. Now she had one less rival, she had one less person to lie to, and the vacancy Raven had left behind might as well be offered to her if, as she’d said, she played her cards well.

“It’s war, Zinnia,” Olivier added quietly. “You’re not used to it, and you don’t have to be. But it is what it is, there are casualties on both sides, some of them with faces we know. People around you will do unforgivable things and you’ll have to decide if you can forgive them. But they are done anyway.”

“I… I understand that. It’s just the first time I have to come to terms with it.”

Olivier nodded.

“Take all the time you need. I can go away for the night, if you want me to.”

“You’re being strangely… lenient about this now,” Zinnia said, distrusting.

Olivier just smiled.

“Because it’s obvious that it’s being too much for you.”
Obvious, and yet it had taken her a while to see.

Zinnia exhaled.

“These kids, Raven dead, this Kimblee walking around like he owned the place; Miles has never looked so glum about anything. I have no idea what the future holds anymore for us with them here.”

“Kimblee’s dangerous,” Olivier said at once. “Stay away from him.”

“I don’t like this one bit,” Zinnia complained. “Starting with the kids, Olivier. Do they have to be behind bars now that Raven’s dead?”

“You should stay away from them too. In fact, you should stay away from everything.” Olivier said very firmly, and Zinnia knew just then she’d done well in not doing that. “Whatever you know, no one can take away from you. But, please, just trust that I will handle it.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you…” Zinnia said, her voice trailing away as she tried to find the words to describe why exactly she felt like she was about to be sunk by two enemy armadas. “I just—you do things very differently from me. You have no scruples.”

“If I had any, Central would eat us alive before we could notice them coming.”

“What I mean,” Zinnia interrupted her, “is that our differences make me feel isolated from everything. I can’t help, you won’t let me, and I can’t do anything on my own because there’s information you’re not sharing.”

“Zinnia,” Olivier said very clearly, staring right into her soul. “You’re a civilian. You don’t have to do anything. It’s my job to protect you, not yours to aid me. This,” she said, explaining herself as best and as concisely as she could, “is me protecting you. For once, trust that I will succeed.”

“I’m not worried about my own protection, as you would have noticed if you listened to me instead of going around making war plans behind my back and killing people.”

Olivier rolled her eyes and took Zinnia’s hands in hers, although Zinnia made it clear she didn’t want this contact right now. She was hurt and worried, and that made for a very difficult environment to talk in.

At least now they understood each other a little better. Olivier was aware that it wasn’t the perfect time to have a conversation because Zinnia wasn’t used to the circumstances it was to be had in, and Zinnia had been reminded that ruthless deaths weren’t Olivier’s modus operandi—she risked and sinned only for her people, not even for herself, Zinnia thought.

“I’m worried for all of us, for the fort,” Zinnia finished. “We both have loyal friends here we don’t want to lose. We both have someone we want protected and safe.” And Zinnia’s voice was firm now, firm enough that Olivier couldn’t miss what she was trying to say.

“You can’t protect me,” Olivier just said. “No one can.”

Silence fell. It was the kind of truth that fell from the sky like a gravestone dropped from a plane. It couldn’t be overlooked, it plunged into a field and left a crater.

Olivier was alone in this, it was her responsibility and her alone to face Central, to scheme so her soldiers would survive the upcoming disasters. And Zinnia couldn’t do anything about that, even if she desperately needed to.
“But you can trust my judgment. And support my choices,” she added.”

“If you promise me one thing,” Zinnia said, serious. Her eyes were hard as rock.

Olivier nodded gently.

“No more killing.”

Sighing, Olivier nodded again. “Alright.”

If it came to that in the future, she would just have to tread carefully and make sure nobody knew of it. She wouldn’t risk having someone else blabber to Zinnia about Olivier’s hard choices.

“And no more locking up kids without reason,” Zinnia continued, now finally daring to look Olivier in the eye. She knew enough after all she’d investigated to be sure the Elric brothers weren’t the enemy, even if they’d been quieter to her than Zinnia would have liked. In all fairness, they’d been following Olivier’s orders, surely, and they had told her everything. “They deserve better.”

Olivier pondered about it for a minute as Zinnia resumed the folding of her clothes. Those two kids had served her well, in the end, despite their initial bout of disobedience. They had held the key to the truth of Central’s plans, after all, and Olivier knew better than to pretend it was otherwise. She was honest in her core, and the debts she owed would not be easily forgotten. She still had to pay this one.

She remembered as well what Kimblee had requested of her. Letting those kids go would not only be non-strategical but also selfish, since Kimblee didn’t look like a qualified nanny. But what choice did she have? If she refused, Kimblee would speak out of turn and tip the scale towards Central by snapping her plans broken. She needed him to plant the seed of suspicion, not to tell the whole tale to her superiors. And the chances of that happening were slim if she didn’t let the kids go with him.

The least she could go before he took them on a hunt for Scar was to make sure they saw something else around the fort aside from the cells.

“I’ll let them out,” she promised to Zinnia now. “What does it matter, anyway? It can’t possibly make this situation worse,” she added, mostly to herself, hoping with all her heart no harm came to those kids when she handed them over to the Crimson Alchemist. At least, since she thought of the kids as allies now, she might have eyes on Kimblee.

Zinnia looked at her again and saw something she hadn’t expected to see. She’d expected Olivier to remain proud and somewhat detached, wallowing in her own actions but in a way that it wasn’t visible. What her eyes met was something very different: a woman who had done more than she physically could, after postponing very much needed emotional reactions, and who kept being asked to remain on her feet through everything—leading all her men through everything. She had killed, in the name of protecting those men; she had played strategic games to anticipate to the enemy’s moves; and she had been alone, always alone, because she didn’t think of risking someone else’s life over what she considered was her job.

But, above all, what shook Zinnia to the core was the remorse that coiled in Olivier’s eyes. It was faint and well-hidden, but definitely there. Remorse that she’d done things and worry that they might not have been enough.

Zinnia put aside her folded clothes to rub Olivier’s right arm.

“Whatever’s coming, we’ll meet it when it does. You always do.”
“This is not the kind of thing you meet.” Olivier replied after some silence. *It’s the kind of thing you lose to.*

“Olivier?”

*It sits in my heart, it paces, it leans against the wall.*

“What?”

*It’s the knowledge that death and destruction exist even if you’re not looking at them, even if you think you can always run faster than them, always look away when they lurk.*

“I love you. I need you to know that. No matter what you’ve done, what you’ll do, I can’t turn it off. I never could. Not even if I left.”

*Death strikes someone else, but in a way it strikes it down too: this knowledge that someone I love could kill.*

“You choose me again… I just—I hope you are aware of what you’re choosing.”

*And I wonder, even if it is ‘kill before you die’, how long will it take my heart to learn to live with it?*

In her dream, Olivier killed Raven with a gun, and the shot echoed off the walls of the fort so loudly no one could hear anything else for a week. In her dream, Zinnia stood alone before the scene, the only witness to Raven’s slow and bloody fall to the pile of cement he would forever be buried in. In her dream, Olivier turned away after that, as if she didn’t see her.

In her dream, Zinnia heard canons in the distance and rumble, as if something big was coming, coming a little closer to her every second, as if the end was already here and she wasn’t in any position to escape it.

When her eyes opened, the light of the room was on and Olivier was already dressed. It took Zinnia a few seconds to still her breathing and remind herself that this was real life. But she could still hear the noise, she could still feel something pounding inside her like the drums of war. And Olivier was already up when she shouldn’t be.

Zinnia sat up on the bed, rubbing at one of her eyes.

“How is it happening now?” she asked. “Are we under attack?”

This January would mark the end of peace between Drachma and Amestris, and every day that passed the fear of this war piled heavier in her heart. All she could possibly do in a war was die in it—or watch Olivier meet that very same fate. Perhaps even both.

Olivier turned to face her, unaware until now that Zinnia had been awake, and knelt by the bed.

“No, don’t worry,” she whispered. “I’m coming down to send more men underground to … retrieve whatever’s left from the first incursion. They probably won’t find much at this point.”
Zinnia’s face relaxed visibly.

“Do you want me to come down with you?”

“I’m not part of the incursion,” Olivier reassured her, “but I need to be there to see them off.”

Zinnia yawned and pushed the covers away.

“I don’t mind getting up now. I wasn’t going to sleep much anyway with you gone...”

Olivier stroked her hair. She could tell Zinnia had been worried, she hadn’t been sleeping as well because Olivier left at strange hours and came back even at stranger hours. It would have upset anyone’s routines.

“Don’t worry. None of this is your fight, flower girl.”

Zinnia took Olivier’s wrist. It wasn’t sweet or kind, it was reassurance that the conversation they’d had last night in bed had happened, that her choice remained, hurt what it may that Olivier wasn’t as innocent as Zinnia had wanted to believe.

“If you’re in it,” Zinnia said, unable to look anywhere that wasn’t Olivier’s blue eyes, “it is my fight.”

Olivier kissed her cheek now and stood up to leave. If she had stayed in that room more than two seconds, it would have taken at least another hour to even think of leaving. And today she had duties to perform. The world kept asking her to be strong, to stand proud, and to always know what to do, even if it’d been a long time since she’d known that. Lately, she soldiered on out of spite, and she hit harder than anyone had ever tried to hit her. But that didn’t mean daily life became any easier, especially in times like these, when threats came at her from under the rocks.

Sometimes that happened literally.

Today she was, once again, putting lives on the line to find out what had happened to the last lost lives. The cycle of losses grew and grew and if she was being honest with herself, she didn’t know how the hell she hadn’t broken down yet. Anyone else would have, and if she didn’t it was because soldiers didn’t dwell, soldiers moved on, focused on saving the next person in danger.

And she was, above everything else, still a soldier.

Her men were scattered across the entire floor, waiting as patiently as they possibly could in these circumstances. When she had told them of what she wanted to do, few had volunteered, but eventually there had been enough names to really call this a rescue party. They all had lost a friend or two, and some would do anything to find out why.

Grief worked in strange ways, she wasn’t one to judge.

“Now, gather up,” she said loud enough for everyone to hear. “I’ve made arrangements so yesterday’s events will be spread as merely a disappearance. But... were anyone to find out what really happened, I acted alone in this. None of you were there. None of you saw or heard anything. Are we clear on that?”

“Yes, general,” a chorus of voices said.

“Boss?” Buccaneer said, making his way to her. “I request permission to speak.”
She blew a lock of hair away from her face.

“What is it?”

“I should go with them. Whatever’s in there that killed everyone,” he said with a lump in his throat, “we’ll need better defense that some torches. I have my automail ready, sir.”

“Absolutely not,” she said without even considering it twice. Buccaneer should always stay safe, always where she could see him, always where no harm could come to him and destroy the dream that Olivier had built for him. A warm house in the mountains where he could watch the snow fall and ride to the fort for a cup of coffee with his old friends.

Buccaneer frowned.

“Smith was a friend of mine,” he grumbled. And now he’s dead, she thought. Perhaps harm has already come to Buccaneer. To us all.

“As you wish,” she finally said, and when he meant to get in the hole, having earned her approval, she grabbed his flesh arm tight but addressed them all: “This entrance remains open, no one else but the Elric kids knows about it, so you’ll be able to come back at any time.”

“Sir, it would be safest otherwise,” Buccaneer said, looking at the rest of the team, who he’d already talked to about this. They had all agreed it was for the best. If the threat underground remained underground, even if it took them, then they would have at least saved the fort. “If we’re not back in twenty-four hours, seal this hole with concrete. We’re not worth an invasion of… whatever is down there.”

“Very well, then.” she said sadly. She let Buccaneer’s arm go at last, but he didn’t go into the hole yet as the rest began to. He just stared at her.

“General,” he said. “Thank you for this.”

She was finally trusting him with something big and dangerous, and even if he’d been after this for a long time now, it tasted bittersweet to have finally achieved it during such a perilous time, when people had died and they were all one step away from going into war. Olivier needed him alive and well now more than ever, and he didn’t want to disappoint her again.

“Don’t thank me until you’re back,” she growled. “And I expect you back in one piece, do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.” And then he went down, the edges of him blurry in the orange light of the torches below.

She waited a few instants until they had all lost themselves into the pitch-black darkness, then she walked away. Her day had only just begun.

Olivier found solace at last in the quietness of her office. Miles must have been away for now, she thought. It was a good thing he hadn’t volunteered for the rescue party, she couldn’t afford to momentarily lose both Buccaneer and him.

But now that that was done, there was something else she needed to do, and it was all the better if she could do it alone. She needed to somehow reach Eastern Command without Central interfering, and for that she would need a third party to carry the message.

Luckily, there was someone in her family who might just be the right person to do so.
Olivier grabbed a pen and began writing:

Dear aunt,

I’m writing because, as you surely know by now, the north is soon to be under attack. My sources tell me Central Command is involved in those plans against my fort, which is why I need you to deliver a message to Eastern Command. Here at Briggs we will resist anything they throw at us, but an iron defense will not always grant us victory. Eastern Command is well known for its attack strategies, we could very well benefit mutually from an agreement against Central. With Mustang’s and my armies, we might have a chance. As for Mustang himself, he will ask—of that I have no doubt—my opinion of him. For the most part, it has not changed. In case you doubt him, rest assured that cocky as he is, the bastard isn’t the kind of man who will tell on me. He will, too, require proof that what you’re saying is real. In that case, a mention of the Elric brothers will do. Tell him that he can count on my allegiance if I can count on his.

I wish I could give you more details on the evil that is looming over our country. For now, if things go according to plan, no harm will come to anyone. But since we can’t be sure of the future, I would recommend caution and to flee out of the country, if possible. I will alert the rest of the family in due time as well.

Once again, thank you for your assistance.

She signed her name, although it shouldn’t have been necessary. It was just a formality, after all. She hadn’t had contact with her aunt in quite some time, but she still absolutely believed she could trust her with this information and this task. Her aunt lived the life of a con woman most of the time, dyeing her hair and changing her name, her services being secret enough that not many people knew about her and popular enough that the right ones knew how to find her. She had always been supportive of Olivier’s endeavors and her wishes to become a soldier. She had always been the only family member that Olivier hadn’t feel inappropriate around. In a way, both women shared their differences and the consequences of being an Armstrong that didn’t fit in. Perhaps that was why Olivier hadn’t had any trouble writing this letter now. Something bigger than herself was at stake here, and she needed all the help she could get. Her aunt would probably understand that better than anyone.

As the afternoon advanced, Olivier came downstairs to find a messenger to reach North City. It didn’t need to be done in the utmost of seerces, but she would have liked to find less people near the gate. The Elric brothers, having been freed already, stood near a blond girl taller than the smallest of the two which Olivier didn’t recognize. When had she entered the fort without her knowing?

They seemed to be talking animatedly, and it was clear to her they were waiting for something. She hurried in finding someone to give the letter and send south, but when she returned they were still there and Kimblee was walking towards them with a smirk on his face.

He didn’t immediately go to them. Instead, he faced her.

“Ah, general, I see you’ve come to see us off.”

“Nothing further from the truth,” she said. “Leaving now, are you?”

“As soon as my car arrives. Happy?”

“Are you, Kimblee?”

She held his gaze for a few seconds until he gave up and chuckled.
“Our short coexistence comes to an end, it seems,” he mused, feigning to be sad about it. “I will dearly miss you, lady Olivier.”

She moved faster than the eye could see, held him up in midair.

“Say that one more time,” she threatened.

But Kimblee only laughed harder.

“Or what? You’ll kill me?”

She tightened her grip on him for a few seconds, then put him down hard and walked away. She could still hear him cackling up like she’d told him the most wonderful joke. She could only imagine what delirious plans he had, what thoughts went through his head.

But he was going now, and whatever darkness hid inside him now she would have no chance to control. Perhaps she should have killed him. Central would come for her regardless. She had killed one of their own and they knew.

Or perhaps she still had some leverage on him. After all, for the present moment he remained on Briggs. Hastily, she walked to her office, where she expected to find a dutiful Miles doing his chores.

He greeted her when she came in and she wasted no time with pleasantries. She broke it to him right away. Kimblee thought he was going to be allowed to slip away from Olivier’s fingers, and he was very wrong.

“Are you sure you want to send me?” Miles asked her after she was done explaining. He hadn’t considered the possibility of any man having to chase Kimblee’s shadow. In all honesty, he had been relieved when he’d heard Kimblee was leaving. He was a selfish, taunting man that Miles had only stood for the sake of his job and his loyalty to the fort.

“I trust no one more than you. If anyone can keep an eye on that alchemist, it’s you, major. You’ve already proved that to me.” He nodded forcefully to accept what she’d initially meant as a compliment, and she immediately added: “I know he is not to your liking.”

“He is not,” he admitted. “But I understand my orders, sir. You need someone you trust on his tail.”

She looked at him. *Such a brave, loyal man.* What would she do without his council, without his fealty? Without him and Buccaneer, Olivier was, unarguably, alone. Alone against the tidal waves, the sole soldier to protect an entire world. She didn’t think she would succeed.

“You have a few minutes to pack some belongings.”

He nodded and looked back at her. At times like this, she could see what the men gossiped about. The look on his eye was more intense than any other man’s. He looked at her differently, all while acknowledging the impossibility of ever having that reciprocated. He still served faithfully, and Olivier could never properly express her gratitude for it.

“I imagine it will be… a long time until we will meet again,” he finally spoke.

“Not that long. When they find Scar, you have my leave to come back. But first make sure those children return safely to… wherever corner of the world they sprouted from.”

He smiled at her, and she afforded one tiny smile in return. One touch of softness wouldn’t kill her, and it would carry him through the distance he was to travel.
“I will. I trust you will know how to stay safe here.”

“We’re Briggs men. Safety’s underrated.” She shook his hand. “Take care of yourself, Miles.”

The wind scattered her hair as she and Zinnia watched from the top of the wall how the car began moving through the snow, with the kids, Kimblee, and Miles as well as some other soldiers.

They seemed so tiny from there, almost like ants in a sea of white and grey. And yet they held the future of the country in their hands just as much as Olivier did. They were going after Scar, perhaps to apprehend him or to ask for his help. Olivier hoped they would find the alkahestry girl she had promised she would look for as well. There had been too much happening lately for her to have been able to keep her promise.

And, now, as those people left, Olivier wondered if she would finally get some peace and quiet, if she could finally close her eyes and process everything that this new year had brought her, like a hunting dog that drags a rotting carcass all the way to its owner, all proud.

“You can’t worry about everyone all the time,” Zinnia said softly.

“I’m not worried about them.” Olivier said, not looking away from the white horizon. Not really, anyway.

“Then what?”

Slowly, Olivier turned her head to look at Zinnia. Her eyes were emptier of life than they had been lately, and that in itself was very telling.

“Something’s brewing. Something big,” she said. “Something beyond any of our control. And I have no idea how to stop it this time.”

And she was scared of what might happen, of what she would not be able to stop, of what she might lose. Of what might happen to this flower girl standing with her despite everything, of what might happen to the friends she’d sent underground and the friends she’d sent south.

It was the first time she’d admitted that to herself.
They spent the next hours waiting, even if they didn’t mean to. Zinnia tried to focus on her work, standing in the snow watching the perimeter or inside cleaning, but it became increasingly hard as time passed and because of Olivier’s own way to deal. She paced the lower levels, neglecting any other duties and refusing to talk to anyone. In a way, Zinnia wasn’t sure anyone would have dared approach her when she was like this. And as the hours passed, she got worse.

Past the twenty-four hour mark, Olivier had left the surroundings of the new opening, posting a man at the entrance in case her rescue team came back, and disappeared from the fort altogether.

It didn’t take Zinnia very long, just a few rounds in the morning across the whole fort, to find out where Olivier had gone to hide. The icy temperatures had never stopped her, but they did manage to constrict her energy a little.

Zinnia found her sitting on top of the wall, there against the wind and the falling snowflakes in a graying sky, as quiet as the building beneath her. She had no words right now, Zinnia thought, or else she wouldn’t have left to find them here.

It had been a day. They should already have been back. And if they weren’t, Olivier knew that could only mean one thing.

One more loss, Zinnia thought to herself as she stood behind Olivier.

“I should go after them,” Olivier said after a while.

“You don’t know what’s in there.”

“Nothing a sword can’t cut down.”

Zinnia wasn’t too sure if Olivier was about to add anything else, so she stayed in silence for a few minutes, waiting. The words were there somewhere, they just had to be reaped from Olivier’s mind and molded into sound.

“I’m supposed to protect them,” Olivier continued softly, her voice unaffected in a way and deeply sad in another. This duality existed within her as easily as the earth saw moon and sun within the span of hours Olivier had been waiting for her men to return. “They trust that I will do so. But how can I, when I’m not there? When I don’t even know if they’re safe?”

Her hair moved with the wind, narrowing her field of vision, but she didn’t care. There was nothing in the landscape before her she wanted to see now.

“I fight for them,” she went on. “To keep them from dying. Too many have died already. And I’m not supposed to dwell on them. Yet… they keep dying, and I keep caring.”

Zinnia didn’t know what she could possibly say to make it all easier for Olivier, or to at least share this with her. She wasn’t all too sure that Olivier wanted to share it. It was her burden to bear as it was her duty to fulfill.

“Leave me, please,” Olivier told her after a while. Zinnia nodded, knowing now at least what Olivier
needed of her. She didn’t leave without kissing the crown of Olivier’s head. In such a storm as the one they were living, perhaps a gesture like that might make all the difference. She had to try.

As hours turned into days, though, and Olivier kept seeking refuge or solitude in the vastness, Zinnia would be sure to follow her, either to bring her something to drink or simply to keep her company, not wanting to leave her alone. But she never stayed for too long. Zinnia supposed that, after all, Olivier left the civilization she knew to be alone, whatever her reasons.

On the morning of the third day, Zinnia decided to check on her again. They hadn’t really talked after last night’s dinner; Olivier had eaten little and left early, and when Zinnia had gone up to the room she had found Olivier already sleeping. It was the first time Olivier was in bed before midnight.

A shoulder on the heavy iron door, Zinnia finally pushed into the cold of the morning. There was a slight breeze today, nothing serious, but when it made contact with the skin it seemed to burn, frozen. The only warm part of her was the fingers touching the mug filled with coffee she’d brought with her.

Olivier was right in the middle of the wall, sitting on the very edge as if she had never been taught to fear falling or as if she’d learned to like the thrill of it. The image would have been poetic if seen from above, but all Zinnia saw was a lump of blue against white and gray.

Careful not to slip on the ice, Zinnia made her slow way towards her.

“I thought you’d gone into the hole.”

Her voice alerted Olivier of her presence, but the general’s head didn’t turn. She remained lost somewhere in the territories that led to the true north of Amestris.

“You really think me that mad?”

“Do I really need to answer that?” Zinnia said, moving like a rusty machinery part when she let herself fall to the floor, legs dangling above the abyss, and handed the mug to her. Olivier’s fingers coiled gladly around it, seeking warmth like a kitten in a cold night.

She smiled faintly.

“It’s freezing up here,” Zinnia said. It was the dead of winter. The real winter, the one that had frozen a monster to its brain. “How can you stand it?”

Because I’m dead inside, Olivier thought.

“I’ve always liked the cold,” she said instead.

“Can’t see why.”

“It’s honest. Brutal, but honest. You know that it has the power to kill you, and here up north it might.”

Zinnia blinked, confused for a moment.

“So you like the idea of freezing to death?”

“I like the idea of a death set in stone,” Olivier replied. “Out there, fighting for my own people, fighting for my country. Dying with honor.”

Zinnia stayed quiet for a second, thinking.
“Is that what they teach you soldiers to want? A death others can put to use?” It was ludicrous, that the country thrived on stolen lives, on arranged demises. “Even in death, they make you serve?” Without being able to help it, Zinnia’s words sounded tense. The more she spoke, the clearer it became, the more it explained about Olivier’s strange habits. And the more it made Zinnia tighten her fists.

“I live to serve,” Olivier rebuked, looking at the mountains. “It makes sense that I should die to serve as well.”

“I never think about death,” Zinnia said after a while, looking at the mountains too, rubbing her hands together. “I’ve never seen the point in fretting over something you’ll never have control over in the end. But…. living here has made me see that maybe I am closer to it than I know. It doesn’t help to know that this is a soldier’s reality from day one.”

At last, Olivier turned to meet her eye.

“You’re not dying here,” she told her. “This is not your war to die in.”

“Sadly, it doesn’t have to be for me to.”

“Still,” Olivier insisted. “I won’t let that happen to you. You have stories to write, places to see, people to love.”

“Olivier,” Zinnia said, “when the war comes to this fort, I will be standing on it—as long as you are, I will too. I need you to know that. I’m not going anywhere.” No matter what you’ve done, Zinnia added in her own mind.

Olivier’s faint smile returned to her face.

“We all think that. Eventually, though, life teaches us differently. Death forces us to learn that lesson.”

Zinnia sighed.

“Do you come here to think about death?”

“I come here because I don’t know where else to go,” Olivier confessed softly. “I will go mad if I stay indoors one more minute. I can see their faces in the dark, running from an evil I can’t stop… At least out here I can focus on the mountains.”

Zinnia had to admit they were an impressive sight. The many peaks so interwoven together that no matter how far you walked, all you could find for miles was chains and chains of rock formations.

She knew now what awaited past them, what lurked in the shadows, possibly advancing already towards the border, intending to cross it very soon. Her stomach closed up at the thought, yet less and less every day. She’d accepted her part in this. She’d walked into this mess, decided not to leave it, and she’d see it through if it was the last thing she did. Anything before running without cause again.

After a while, her entire body sore from the cold (she could never understand how Olivier put up with it), Zinnia stood up with some effort.

“I need to go back to work,” she said. She kissed Olivier’s cheek. “Don’t stay out here too long. I really don’t want you to freeze.”
“Don’t worry about me…” Olivier said, and Zinnia left her alone again in the silence of the valley.

She went straight for the kitchens. With Buccaneer gone, some tasks had fallen to the same rotation Miles had implemented time ago for patrols. In their absence, the fort had improvised, and they had done so wisely, following their steps.

Fully aware now that she was not to be trusted with food, she mostly did dishes and mopped the floors and cleaned the tables. It was mindless work, and it distracted her well from the horrors in her head.

And judging from how quickly the soldiers had taken up the new routines, she wasn’t the only one with echoes of war bursting in her head.

Having finished her work for today and not having patrol till later, Zinnia headed straight for the elevator. She could’ve gone up to shake Olivier into coming back in and being warm for a while, but for now it was better to let her mourn in her own way. Buccaneer and his team had been gone for too many days now, and she knew Olivier harbored no hope now of them coming back. Olivier had accepted it, and she was mourning in truth if not in fact. Zinnia agreed that they all should let her.

She leaned against the wall of the elevator, muscles stinging after a few hours of intense work, and closed her eyes. These last few days were definitely taking a toll on her—

“Well well well, if it isn’t the city flower!” a booming voice said, coming into the elevator.

Zinnia’s eyes opened wide.

“BUCCANEER???”

“What? Do I have the head a ghost of something?”

“We, um, thought you dead?”

His face toughened at that.

“I need to find the general,” he only said,

Zinnia sighed and pointed upwards.

“Top of the wall,” she said. Buccaneer pressed the right button to take him there. “Be careful; she’s in a mood.”

“Poor woman has a right to be…” he muttered.

Zinnia said nothing, and when her floor came up, she left him alone to deal with the harshest force of nature.

“I told you,” Olivier said, without turning. Now, she was facing the end of the valley where the road led south. “I won’t freeze up here.”

Buccaneer cleared his throat.

She recognized him instantly and her heart flooded with relief. It meant her worst nightmares hadn’t come to happen, the team was safely back home. And since he seemed to be the only one here, the rest had already warmed up.

A pang of guilt hit her when she remembered what ‘the rest’ could be. Would they have retrieved
any men from under the ground?

“General, sir,” he said. “There were only two survivors.”

“Oh…” she only said. Her eyes, as during the rest of the day, remained focused on the far-off horizon whose light would soon begin to fade.

“What are you doing up here all alone?”

She gave the short answer:

“I like the winters up here. Everything’s black and white. I appreciate the pure simplicity of it.”

“That’s not true, sir. You can see blue if you look up.”

Taken aback by his reply, Olivier did look up. And what she found was that her own simplicity, under such vibrance, could only break into tiny pieces. *Nothing is ever black and white*, she thought. *I should have known.*

The world rushed back into her head, all because of that pure blue. The blue soldiers forgot existed. All they saw was the color of the dirt where they fought and fell, blue was but a sort of impossibility for them. Because of what they did, because of what they would always fail to do. It hurt to know what Olivier did, it hurt to be able to do nothing about it. The mountains had taken that away, now the mountains gave it back.

“How would you like to die?” she asked now, so softly Buccaneer didn’t understand at first.

“What?”

“Your death. Have you ever imagined what it would be like? What you wanted it to be like?”

He thought about it, then laughed thunderously and sat with her.

“To be honest with you right now, I never thought I’d make it this far.”

She smiled.

“And why is that?”

“Well,” he said. “Soldier life, sir. Used to be harder than it is for you pipsqueaks.” He grinned and grinned, and she didn’t tell him off. She’d had time to miss it these past few days. “I figured I’d be lucky if I made it to forty.”

“Was it a disappointment to reach that age?” That was five years in the future for her. She didn’t know if she would live to see it. If Buccaneer would.

“On the contrary. It was… one of those surprises you don’t know how to handle. How are you supposed to live a life you hadn’t pictured?” he said. “With time I learned you just go on living, and that life is what you make of it, not what you planned about it.”

She nodded.

“And to answer your question, ever since I took the reins of my own life—as much as my job allows, at least—the ideal death would be to just … go quietly, I guess.”

“No death in battle?” she asked, almost amused. “No dying while indulging yourself in some feast?”
He shook his head.

“I don’t want mine to be the death of a soldier,” he said. “I want it to be the death of a man.”

Olivier thought that very wise, and she thought to herself if she could ever learn to want such a death, or if she would truly be a soldier till the very end. *Bury me under this fort*, she thought again, *and tell my story to the foolish that come after me so they learn from my mistakes.*

Silence took over for a little while. And Olivier was thankful, now she had something else to ponder: Buccaneer’s view on what she’d been wondering about. *The death of a man,* he’d called it. Her only question was: how does a man die? What qualifies as the death of a man?

She thought she was close to the answer when blotchy figures appeared in the distance, moving slowly but surely.

“What is that?” Buccaneer asked.

Olivier remained in silence, resigned to her fate. The fate she had commanded, although not many knew of it. After a while, it became clear that the figures were cars, coming to Fort Briggs to disrupt whatever peace Olivier had found in this conversation.

“They’re here…” she said in a mutter. She had known this was coming, it only meant things were, for now, still going according to plan. She just hadn’t expected it so soon.

Buccaneer didn’t need details.

“Boss…” he said, a little lost. “Should I …?”

“It’s alright, Buccaneer.” She got up. “It’s time.”

A crowd gathered at the main entrance of the fort when Zinnia descended the stairs, looking to get a nice cup of coffee to get going.

“Everything’s alright, don’t panic…” Buccaneer was saying patiently, voice loud enough that all men could hear. “We just have visitors.”

*More visitors?* someone asked.

Zinnia pushed past everybody to get to Buccaneer.

“Visitors?” she asked.

His face was contorted in a grimace, like he wasn’t pleased at all to see her there.

“Yes, yes. Central Command has sent a few men. Nothing to worry about—”

As if to contradict his words, the crowd parted when the doors opened and Olivier emerged against a backdrop of white and blue, accompanied by several men whose faces no one had seen around here before.

“This way, gentlemen,” Olivier told them.

When they were getting out of sight, Zinnia tried to get out of the crowd to follow them. Buccaneer
grabbed the back of the neck of her uniform.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

She turned around to face him head-on and he let go.

“To find out what they want, obviously.”

“Ah, no, you’re going to stay put, with the men, minding your own business.”

Zinnia slit her eyes.

“She’s my girlfriend,” she said. “And she’s escorting two Central pigs into her office. You know how well that can end after she’s killed Raven?” she whispered that last part.

Buccaneer actually sank down a little to be eye-level with her.

“And do you know how well it can end for me if I let you go eavesdrop?” he said in the same tone. “These are dangerous people. Whatever they’re here for—” She rolled her eyes. It was obvious why they were here. “Trust me, it’s better not to get involved. Remember you shouldn’t be here in uniform, working our shifts and eating our food. Olivier could get in trouble if someone found out.”

Zinnia froze. Was that true?

“Come with me, then,” she said after a while. “That way we can say we were searching for wood worms or something.”

Buccaneer didn’t move.

“Fine,” she said, crossing her arms. “I’ll go alone.”

“Don’t get caught,” Buccaneer grumbled.

She nodded and all but ran away from the still-muttering men, taking the stairs to the office. She hoped she would be able to hear something interesting, not arrive when the chat was over. Her heart pounded uncomfortable, and not from the physical effort, when she arrived to the closed door.

Of one thing she was sure, these men were here to question Olivier for Raven’s alleged disappearance. And if they did their job right, they would have proof enough to accuse her of murder. And god only knew what would happen after that.

Perhaps they would offer the post of major general of Briggs to some other person, some egotistical ambitious man with zero notion of what the rules were in the north. Her stomach closed up at the idea that she’d have to flee if that happened. She’d have to flee and Olivier would probably be either arrested or executed for high treason and murder.

“… our intelligence suggested so,” a gravely voice was saying. Zinnia had to lean closer to the door to hear the rest of it. “This was, after all, the last place the general was seen, correct?”

“We advised him against walking the fort alone,” Olivier said, calmly. Zinnia was glad, that meant Olivier still meant to defend her innocence, fake as it was, and buy some more time. “This place is, as you can see, labyrinthine. Anyone could get lost if they didn’t know the layout.”

“Have you searched the fort, General Armstrong?”

“Thoroughly.”
“Then, if we’re to trust the skill of your soldiers, it would appear Raven is not here.”

“Perhaps he left,” Olivier said nonchalantly. “He didn’t think much of warning us of his every move.”

“As he shouldn’t,” the man agreed with her. “But, understandably, this cannot be overlooked as a fancy of the general. He cannot be contacted, he is not here, he didn’t give notice that he would be leaving. The logical conclusions, I believe, may have already come to you.”

“And are you here to enlighten me, in case they had not?” Olivier said. She was walking on thin ice and she knew it, but she still would not yield. Olivier would rather be hacked down like a tree rather than willingly bend to a foreign power.

Zinnia could almost hear the smile of the man.

“No, ma’am,” he said, his tone clearly cynically amused. “We’re here to take over.”

Zinnia clasped a hand over her mouth. No, it’s impossible!

“You’re expected for questioning in Central Command,” he continued. “We will assume command of Briggs from here on until you’re … deemed fit to return.”

“You will do no such thing,” Olivier replied coldly.

“Oh, yes, I believe we will,” the man said. “The Führer himself wishes to see you.”

If she’d been brave or perhaps foolish, Zinnia would have kicked the door down and faced those men with all the wrath and chaotic energy that Olivier would not don in their presence. She would stop them from taking over her home—their home.

It was sacrilege. To remove Olivier from Briggs would be like severing a head from a body. No matter how strong and lustrous that body was, without a head to guide it, the body’s strength was useless. Olivier had trained them to be autonomous, yet she had also, perhaps inadvertently, trained them to love her, to be loyal only to her. That loyalty would mean whoever took over Briggs would never truly be a leader, he would be ordering a body without a head.

“If I were you, general,” the man continued. “I’d go prepare. You have a long journey ahead of you.”

She should have known what awaited behind that door, but she hadn’t wanted to believe it. Even when she saw it, a woman clearly placed there with the sole objective to argue, Olivier thought she might be remembered as a coward by some invisible watcher if she ran. And what would running accomplish? Sticking things out, standing one’s ground was what won wars, if you mixed it with a little bit of subtle advancing. She should know.

But she had no clue how to win this one, this particular war that awaited inside her own bedroom.

“I heard everything,” Zinnia said when Olivier reluctantly got in and closed the door behind her. “And there literally is no way you’re going.”

Olivier snorted. Of course Zinnia had heard, of course she knew. It would have been a greater surprise if she hadn’t.
But Olivier had lost people, she’d agreed to letting herself be manipulated, she’d risked her own safety and possibly the safety of the whole fort, she’d been called ‘lady’, and now she continued to be bossed around by one of the few people that could. Enough.

“And what the fuck do you want me to do?” she said as calmly as she could, which was not much. “It’s clearly not a request. It’s an order. And those are usually meant to be followed.”

“It’s slaughter, Olivier. You murdered a general in cold blood with several witnesses. You’re going down there to get killed, probably with some torture thrown in the mix before that.”

“So will I if I insist on staying.”

Zinnia took a few steps towards her, thinking perhaps that her closeness would change Olivier’s mind.

“But you’ll be here. You’ll be home. That’s a battle we can win.”

Olivier just stared at her. She doubted she’d find the words to convey how tired she was, how done, of all of this. If only she could go back to a few months ago, quietly sitting on top of the wall before winter hit and just wondering what the hell was wrong with her feelings and why she still had them. She missed when that had been the biggest problem she’d had to deal with.

“These Central dogs?” she said at last. “They won’t come alone. More will show up if we fight. And I won’t let my men risk their lives for me.”

Not one more man would fall for her, Olivier would do everything in and beyond her power to keep that from happening. Her hands were blotchy enough with blood as it were.

A little hesitatingly, Zinnia took Olivier’s hands in her own.

“Please don’t go,” she muttered.

It was, Olivier understood, Zinnia’s last resort. She had spied, she had found out darker truths than she’d expected to, and now she’d run out of energy and arguments against Olivier. She would not be worn down, not even by Zinnia.

“I can’t not go.”

And Zinnia herself knew this. Olivier could see it in her quiet stance, in the way she kept looking her in the eye to see if she’d changed her mind, in the way her fingers fidgeted over her own.

For a few seconds, Olivier let go. She knew this would have to be goodbye. She’d have to grab whatever she could carry and head south, so south she’d get dizzy, and leave for a few days. And the future of the fort, of the entire country, would depend on those few days.

Then Zinnia spoke again:

“Okay. Then I’ll go with you.”

Olivier almost winced. She should have realized, too, that soon Zinnia would abandon one of her arguments for another one, another crazy argument that she could cling to for days.

Olivier’s own defense was shaky. And it got shakier still as seconds passed and Zinnia’s words echoed in her mind. I’ll go with you. Despite not having the full truth, despite having to enter everything dangerous without a clue of what it was so, despite the distance and the risk of getting
caught by someone in Central, despite the fact that Zinnia had never in her life shown proclivity for
wars, even if she kept saying she would see this one through hand-in-hand with Olivier.

*She’s literally going into the unknown,* Olivier said as something heavy plopped on her chest as if
fallen from the sky. *All to follow me.*

She wished, for a moment, that she hadn’t made a leader out of herself. That way, perhaps, she could
win this.

“Zinnia…” she said, lifting a hand to cup Zinnia’s petite face. But she already carried defeat in the tip
of her tongue when she said that.

“I’m not going to stay here like a damsel in distress, cut off from the world,” Zinnia stated.

“Cut off from danger,” Olivier corrected.

“I have family down there too, you know?” Zinnia said softly. She had melted right away into
Olivier’s hand. “What happens if your plans fail and whatever happens catches them off-guard?”
Olivier didn’t even bother to lie and say that there were no plans. “I need to warn them.”

“You can do that from here. I can even go warn them myself. But I want you to stay in Briggs where
you’ll be safe.”

“I want you to stay here too,” Zinnia said matter-of-factly. “Who wins? Neither of us. We both go.”

Olivier exhaled loudly. She was going to have to put old techniques to use. Techniques that smelled
of train stations and youth and the idea of snow. She hardened her expression and dropped her hand
from Zinnia’s face to cross her arms over her chest.

“You’ll just be dead weight,” she said it as if she meant it, serious and cold, detached from the love
that was leading her to say this. “I can’t go there and have to constantly look over my shoulder to
make sure you’re alright.”

*But what is the alternative, Olivier,* she asked herself regardless. She asked it for the first time.
Fifteen years ago she had went on talking until hearts had broken, never to mend again. *Letting her
stay here and perish to Drachma anyway? If you had to choose, gun to your head, would you let her
risk dying here or in Central? What can be the biggest bloodshed? Do I make her remain where we
know for sure there will be one or do I let her come with me where everything will happen?*

Zinnia, though, had things very clear, ever the stubborn mule who insists on taking a right when the
sign clearly says to go left. “Then don’t. I can handle myself.”

Olivier gave out a single loud chuckle.

“Like hell that’s going to happen!”

Now it was Zinnia’s turn to get serious. Her face showed now nothing but determination. “I’ve said
it before, I’ll say it again. You underestimate me.”

“I really am not.” Because Olivier knew now the magnitude of things, the real magnitude of it all,
and how things came in to play. No matter how skilled Zinnia had gotten at playing soldier, it
wouldn’t be enough to face any of that.

“I’m coming,” Zinnia replied, resolute.
She had made her choice, and she had made it time ago. She had stayed here because of Olivier for longer than she’d known, and she had chosen not to leave because Olivier had shown her she didn’t have to, then Zinnia had realized on her own that what kept her here was the same loyalty Briggs men felt towards her, if only a little spiced up by feelings of other kind. Olivier would be a fool to ignore all of that just for the sake of keeping her safe. There was no safe, there never had been, they’d just pretended there was.

“I’m of no use on this fort,” Zinnia said. “I’ve never been .”

With a sad smile, Olivier cupped Zinnia’s face again, thumb skipping over her cheekbones.

“That’s a lie,” she said softly. “You’ve been the soul of it. We needed a soul, we already had a heart.”

It had begun to snow while they were packing, and now the track marks of the cars that had arrived earlier had been entirely erased by a layer of white.

Buccaneer refused to look out at the valley. He’d heard rumors that the car that was waiting by the gate was for the general, that the men who had come were going to take her away for questioning, and he had immediately known plans were really working out for her. But the sole thought of having to live in this fort, no matter for how few days it was, without her… it pained him physically.

He loved her like a younger sister, too much to pretend her departure wouldn’t take its toll on his mood.

And every time his eyes so much as brushed over the snow outside, he felt a pang of loss already. He knew how much she was risking for them all, and at the same time he admired and feared for her. Everything could go very wrong, she could be discovered, and then she would not stand a chance with her army in the north.

Besides, with Miles gone, when she left he would be alone with the children. Alone to play games that without her to bother wouldn’t make anyone happy.

He still waited by the door, putting his own feelings aside, to see her off. And when she emerged from the stairs, Buccaneer was not entirely surprised to see that she was not alone.

Zinnia, child, he thought. Not you too.

But, deep down, if he’d learned something in the past months, it was that Zinnia would not stand still while the rest of the world saved itself. She’d do her part in saving it, even if it was helping the morale of Buccaneer’s boss. And, if he was being honest, he was kind of glad Olivier wouldn’t be alone in foreign lands.

He was surprised, though, when Olivier and Zinnia approached him.

“Leaving us so soon?” he said to Zinnia.

She just shrugged; her face was sunken and sad.

“It had to happen sooner than later.”

He could feel the tears coming and he was absolutely not going to cry in front of his superior. Olivier
had not left in fifteen years and Buccaneer had not been allowed to leave either in longer than that, it was, after all, novelty that he was facing today.

Olivier eyed him as a woman who clearly knew he was holding back tears and stepped closer to him. This was her goodbye, the last few remarks she would be able to make, and she had to do it well.

“I will stay in touch with you, Buccaneer,” she told him. “No matter what it takes, I will not be leaving you unattended.”

“It’s just for a few days, sir. It will be alright.”

She gritted her teeth. What she wanted to say, she couldn’t say in front of Zinnia. She couldn’t say that she didn’t know how long it would take or how longer it would all get if she was discovered in her schemes. She couldn’t say that ‘it’s just for a few days’ wasn’t true.

So she changed the subject.

“Obey your new commanders,” she told him. “For all of your sakes, I hope you will all heed that.”

Buccaneer made the face she had feared he would, that of someone who was old enough to know he was going to do what he wanted anyway.

“And,” she added reluctantly. “For the love of god, Julian, take good care of yourself.”

He couldn’t help but notice she had said that in the singular, addressed to him and him only. He saluted her, following a protocol that in Briggs was long dead most of the time but that now was well-deserved.

“Likewise, sir,” he said right before she saluted back and Zinnia and her approached the car.

As Olivier opened the door for Zinnia and the girl got in, Buccaneer yelled from the entrance, facing all the snow at once:

“Briggs will stand, general! For you!”

Chapter End Notes

There's some scenes in this one that never fail to make me cry ^^

The woodworms thing was a reference to Merlin (the BBC version)!

Also, as you might have guessed already, the journey will take 'em south now :3
Central City

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The questioning was neither quick nor friendly. These men were not here to play games, and they made that very clear with their accusations, teasing each and every soldier in the fort that Olivier was going to pay for what she’d done at the same time that they asked them what they knew.

Buccaneer had been right, the fort stood. Out of sheer stubbornness and loyalty, Briggs did not give away any secrets Olivier had kept till her departure, and they would keep them until her return. Olivier was coming back, all they had to do was wait.

The air had turned tense and dull with these new superiors changing things. They prepared the new schedules as if they were the bosses of this place, as if the real boss wouldn’t ever be coming back to make it hers again. Buccaneer missed Miles, of all people. With him by his side, at least this waiting would have been more pleasant. Now, he was allowed on patrols because Olivier wasn’t there to forbid him to go, but he missed the quiet days of desk hours and chitchat with Zinnia or whoever passed by.

In the short while that Central had had command of Briggs, things had changed drastically. And no one liked it.

Buccaneer arrived back at the fort at the warmest hour outside, body chilly after a couple of hours of standing the cold, and the first thing he went for was a coffee. The lounge, fortunately, hadn’t been closed down yet.

A small group of soldiers sat in their usual spot, but they were neither playing a card game nor indulging in some gossip. They were quiet. Briggs men, quiet. For crying out loud…

Buccaneer was unnerved just by thinking about it. This wasn’t the home he had fought for all his life, this was a pale shadow that had been enforced by their superiors, which didn’t mean they weren’t allowed to fight to get the original back.

“Gentlemen,” he said as he filled a cup with coffee and sat with them.

“Buc…” a few of them greeted him back.

It killed him to see how no one asked him to ascertain any rumors or tried to get him to talk about his own secrets. They were just… sitting there, waiting for their breaks to be over, waiting for the day to end and for the morning to bring their lost realities back.

After a while, his nerves got the better of him and he slammed a huge hand on the table.

“That’s it,” he grumbled. “Are we really going to let is slide? Let them take away our boss, our jobs, our joy?”

“Not much we can do,” someone said.

“Course there is. We resist. We’ve been doing well, staying loyal,” Buccaneer said. “But it’s not enough. They want to incriminate the boss, and they’re not ever going to. They want to get us to kneel before them, subjuge us, turn us into men like them.” Buccaneer smirked darkly at the idea. “Are we … going to let them?”
That did it.
“"I won’t."
“"Me neither…”
“Never,” said Austin, sitting alone in a corner, raising his voice a little to be heard.
“Good, kid!” Buccaneer said. “Come over here, sit with us. You were a Central boy not long ago.”
Austin gulped. “Yes.”
“You know how they think. How do we bother the hell out of them?”
Austin blushed.
“Stand our ground,” he stuttered slightly. “Prove to them that we will not move, that they will not pass.”
“Second that,” Buccaneer said, nodding.
“That’s been the plan all along,” someone else pitched in, fingers curled around a cup of something hot. “There’s no way those dogs will get through to us even if General Armstrong is gone. We stand as one.”
Buccaneer stood up. “Spread the word. We resist.”

They had barely left Briggs when the silence in the car was broken by a gasp coming from Zinnia’s side of the car.
“What?” Olivier whispered as non-apprehensively as she could. “What’s wrong?”
“Could we—could we make a … stop?”
“A stop? Where?” Olivier said, not understanding.
“I … I have some stuff in my old house I’d like to take with me, just in case.”
Olivier rolled her eyes. “This is a short trip. What could be so important?”
“Just trust me. I need it.”
Olivier addressed the driver, announcing that they would need to take a detour.
He didn’t need more indications until they reached the town. The car was too wide for some of the streets, and Zinnia said she’d just go on foot and that she wouldn’t be long. Olivier insisted on going with her, but Zinnia said it wasn’t necessary. When she returned, she did so with a rudimentary box that she refused to leave in the trunk. Instead, she put it on her lap, hands curled over it.
Olivier arched an eyebrow as the car engine started.
“You’re not going to tell me what’s in it?”
Zinnia blushed a little. She had only remembered this box by a miracle, because she’d seen the
buildings of Iver buried under some snow and she’d immediately recalled her previous life there, where most of her things still were. This was but a memory of her previous life, something dear to her that she didn’t want forgotten in some freezing house in the middle of nowhere.

With a sigh, she opened the box for Olivier to see.

“Knives…” Olivier muttered.

“I told you I could handle myself,” Zinnia said, smiling to herself. Olivier had never wanted to believe her, not even when they’d fought against one another and Zinnia had won.

“Maybe we should get you a gun instead,” Olivier said, a hint of humor in her tone.

“Maybe. I’d be a fairly good shot after so much practice.”

“It still won’t do you any good in the world you’re going to enter.”

“To be honest, I have no idea what the kind of world I’m going to enter.”

“I noticed,” Olivier said, tense. Whatever had been said before, Olivier knew it was a hindrance to be bringing someone to take care of, even if it was someone Olivier would gladly give her life for. Zinnia might be skilled in combat, in basic fort duties, and she might know how to pass for a soldier because that had basically been her job for months, but she was still a girl who had lived most of her life sheltered by a family and unaware of the kind of province she belonged in.

When they returned to Central, Zinnia wouldn’t be returning so much as relearning where she’d lived for twenty-four years.

The trip to North City happened almost in silence. Olivier watched Zinnia out of the corner of her eye as much as she could. The flower girl kept looking out of the window, at the mountains they were leaving behind and the road ahead like she’d never seen it before, but she had travelled those paths before to get to the north in the past. Zinnia did look at things with renewed curiosity even if she already knew them. She was… excited, in a way, about this. And that scared Olivier, because she wasn’t. She was scared.

Olivier Armstrong, major general of Briggs, the Impregnable Northern Wall, scared. If her enemies knew, they would know to strike now. Yet, oh, she was. So much was in her hands, even Zinnia’s safety. And Zinnia didn’t seem to be aware, lost in a world of whites and grays once the city was finally before them. Olivier wondered if Zinnia was remembering she could have ended up here, living under her previous boss’s care, had she chosen differently at any point of the last few months.

For a moment, Olivier almost told her that she could still go back to Briggs, or that they would find the bookseller’s house in this layout of buildings and Zinnia could get out of the car and have a proper safe place to stay until this all ended. She still didn’t.

Zinnia was an adult. If she’d wanted to, she would have asked for that.

They arrived at the train station after not very long. The driver helped them get their luggage—a mere suitcase—and they left the car behind to enter the building. It wasn’t very luxurious, nothing like Grand Central in the capital, just a few planks of wood and all but a single track for the trains. But the conditions could have been worse; at least it wasn’t snowing.

They tried to get on the next departing train, but the clerk informed them that it would be an hour. Olivier bought the tickets anyway, and they went to see where they could find a place to sit down and get warm, since the few seats at the station where taken and there was still time.
They found a bar just around the corner and, since it was not very crowded, they were able to find a couple of seats. Zinnia gulped, intimidated at the noise and the décor, while Olivier went to get something to drink for the both of them. There was a bear head and paws on the wall and framed pictures of hunting trips, not to mention the bull rug on the floor and the bottles of booze on the counter. The company, though, was familiar to her. Broad men laughing and telling jokes, taking refuge from the cold and the hard hours of work. That, she knew very well.

She couldn’t help but smile. When Olivier came back with a tankard and a coffee, she’d been listening to a couple of them talk about bear-hunting season for a few minutes.

“Drink,” Olivier instructed her, pushing the coffee towards her side of the table. It felt weird to share a table, each sitting opposite of he other; normally they sat together at home. “After months of Briggs coffee, it’ll taste like heaven.”

“I’m taking your word for it,” Zinnia said. She nosed the coffee first, probably trying to make sure it wasn’t too warm. Olivier almost laughed. She just had to do that, she just had to check first. It was endearing and annoying and what she needed to stop thinking about the thing they were both going to do and had already begun to.

Zinnia took the tiniest of gulps and her face wrinkled as she tried to decide where she’d gotten enough of the beverage to form an opinion, then her features relaxed and she smiled.

“We should come here more often,” she said. “Don’t we have any business in North City that we can use as an excuse?”

Olivier actually laughed a little now.

“Unfortunately, we have our food delivered, so that’s a no.”

“Pity,” Zinnia said, taking another gulp of coffee.

Olivier noticed, watching her, that Zinnia’s eyes alternated between staring at her drink and inspecting Olivier as if she expected her to grow a third eyebrow.

“Are you doing alright?” Zinnia asked.

*There it is…* Olivier thought to herself.

“You ask that a lot,” she said.

“You look like shit a lot.”

Olivier glared at her and finally took a gulp of her beer. It wasn’t much better than Iver’s, but still good. It had been a while since she’d drunk.

“We don’t have to do this. I know the truth, and so do you. There’s no need to verbalize it.”

“I figured you’d say something like this. Is that why you didn’t talk in the car?”

“I didn’t have anything to say.”

Zinnia put a hand over Olivier’s left.

“You’re right,” she said. “We don’t have to do this. But, hypothetically, if you ever wanted to, I’m always down for it, okay?”
“This isn’t a vacation. You can stop acting like it is.”

“I never said it was one.”

“You keep talking to me like I’m being difficult at the beach.”

“You would be difficult at the beach…” Zinnia muttered to herself.

“I shouldn’t have let you come,” Olivier said, face-palming, then slamming her face against the dirty table.

“Will you give it a rest? Sure, we’re not on vacation and we’re going somewhere dangerous to, probably, get you killed. But humor me: even if it winds up being an argument, talk to me. I’m more conversational than I look.”

Olivier lifted her head from the table just in time to see Zinnia grin like a child.

“One of us had to be…” she said.

“Now finish your beer,” Zinnia said, still grinning exaggeratedly. “Because, rest assured, I am going to give it my best to turn this into a vacation.”

Olivier groaned but eventually straightened herself up and drank.

A while later, they headed back to the station. Luckily, their train was in already, so they were able to get inside as soon as they arrived and didn’t have to wait outside in the bitter cold. Zinnia was almost bouncing on her seat, looking out of the window at the other passengers as Olivier sulked in her allotted corner.

Olivier, given that they had a private compartment, took the opportunity to intervene.

“Listen to me,” she said. “You can be happy about this, I don’t mind much, as long as you know that it’s not a game. If I’m found out, or you’re found out, execution is very likely to be our fate.” Zinnia listened intently, holding back on the bounciness. “I’m not talking imprisonment or a fine, I’m talking death sentence. I may deserve it for several reasons I’m not getting into now, but you’re innocent of everything they might accuse you of. And yet it won’t matter. You need to promise me that you’ll play your part well.”

“And what exactly is my part?”

“You’re invisible. My adjutant.”

“Oh, I’m Miles,” Zinnia understood.

Olivier nodded, trying not to roll her eyes.

“You work for me, you know nothing of my personal life and let alone of what brings me to Central.”

Zinnia blinked.

The train started moving and she lost track of things for a moment as she looked out of the window again, watching the north disappear inch by inch, then foot by foot, until it was a blot behind them. Olivier waited patiently for the initial surprise to be over.

She brought down her voice now.
“Do you think you can do that?”

“Well, it’s not very hard, is it?”

“It’s harder than staying away from me like with Raven.”

_It’s standing next to you and pretending you’re nothing to me when you could never be nothing_, Olivier thought.

“Are you really going to bring me around like you would with Miles?” Zinnia said, guessing the answer already. It was Olivier she was talking to, in the end. She liked to do things on her own.

“When it’s necessary, yes,” Olivier answered laconically.

“And when will it be necessary?”

“Introductions, mostly. The rest of the time you’re free.”

She didn’t think she’d be allowed an adjutant when the generals gathered, bringing her with them.

Zinnia shrugged. “Doesn’t sound like a bad plan.”

Olivier snorted. “I’m glad you think so.” _Because it’s going to be so boring._

They let the miles stretch as Zinnia watched the world around them turn less white into brown and some splotches of green and red. The North Area was vast and, as it turned out, not homogeneous. The towns that she saw in the distance were nothing like Iver, bigger in size and full of people. Some had their own train station, which she had a chance to see from a distance as Olivier smiled at her innocence.

Even if Zinnia had witnessed all of this before, she hadn’t seen it in winter, with the trees leafless and the ground somewhat damp and snowy in some cases. It was like seeing it all anew.

The closer they got to Central, the less snow there was and the less steep the territory became. There were forests of pines too where once there had been mountains, and the sky got darker and darker as well; they seemed to be driving closer to the storm.

Closer to Central.

“How long has it been since you left the north?” Zinnia asked at some point.

Olivier now was looking out of the window as well, a hand underneath her chin.

“I never left it. I’ve been here for almost twenty years.”

Zinnia seemed impressed. “That’s half a life.”

“What do you want me to do? I’m old.”

Almost twenty years stuck in the same fort, with the same people, the same responsibilities, the same haunting memories. Maybe it would be refreshing for her to leave all that in terrible hands like she had, even despite the circumstances that drove her away from Briggs. The prospect of returning to the birthplace of the Armstrong family did not thrill her, though.

“And you never took some days off?” Zinnia kept asking. “To see, I don’t know, something different?”
“I don’t take days off.”

“Did you ever think of coming back home?”

“Chatty, are we?” Olivier teased with a smile. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, leaning her head against the window. “You know the story. I welcomed leaving.”

“Yeah, but, I don’t know… There’s more to Central than your family. You could’ve wanted to see those things again.”

“Sure,” Olivier replied. “There’s also the enemy.”

Zinnia threw her book at her. Olivier caught it without a problem.

“Now you’re throwing books at me?” she complained.

“You’re being cynical.”

Olivier rolled her eyes.

“Are you really asking me about my ex?”

Zinnia smirked. “I distinctly said ‘things’.”

“I left her too, flower girl. I left everything, I didn’t want to see any of it ever again.”

_How well you’ve learned to lie, Armstrong. And how easily anyone could see through those lies. She probably does right now, she’s looking at you and she pities you for missing something you can’t ever admit to having loved after you left._

Or perhaps she had. Zinnia herself must have understood pretty well what it meant to leave love behind because it would have never lasted if you’d stayed. She, too, had her fair share of stories about her youth.

Zinnia sighed now.

“And yet you’re going to.”

Olivier inhaled deeply.

“And yet I’m going to…”

Funny how things turned out. She’d fled her past, and now she was nearing it at an alarming rate. In a few hours, she would set foot on the place that had last seen her as a nubile girl with hopes and aspirations. A woman would look herself in the reflection of the floor instead, would the girl recognize her?

“What are we going to do?” Zinnia asked after a few minutes. She was not going to stand still and quiet in hours, was she? No matter what novelties the moving landscape offered, Zinnia would still be more interested in this little cubicle and the mind sitting across from her.

“About what?”

“I live miles from the city center,” Zinnia replied. “It’s not very far, but if you need me, I’ll—”

Olivier blinked. Did Zinnia plan to go back to her town?
“Oh,” she let out before she could stop herself. “I just… I assumed we’d be going to my family’s household.” And before Zinnia could say anything to that, she added: “It’s large enough to accommodate you as well.”

“You sure?”

Olivier arched an eyebrow. “Unless you want to take two rooms at headquarters, as is customary.”

That would have been a show, regardless of how well Zinnia performed at being just another soldier. Olivier had slowly built a reputation worthy of a bear of the north and if the men at Central were anything like those at Briggs, rumors would begin circulating about her the second she arrived. If they hadn’t already.

Well, haven’t there always been rumors?

She was the wall that separated Amestris from Drachma, if not in fact at least in the truth privy to soldiers and civilians alike. She was feared and respected because of her job up north. She had been talked about before that and she would be talked about after.

Still, her first thought when needing housing in Central hadn’t been to make use of the installations in Central Command. Despite the history with her family, she had preferred to return to the Armstrong household, which she had a claim to, at least.

“I’m fine with staying at your place,” Zinnia said, brushing a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. “I just—I never thought I’d actually be going.”

“You haven’t thought this through.” Olivier told her off.

She had. In excruciating detail. If she closed her eyes, amongst the several war images she saw, she pictured her mother’s pout when she saw her walking in after fifteen years, but she knew she could stomach it so much better now than at twenty. Now, she’d walk in anyway, head held high, drop her luggage for the maid to carry upstairs and show Zinnia the guest room where she’d be sleeping. As for the senior staff, that would be another kind of battle entirely, but the same would be required of her: the ability to resist and the skill of patience and cunningness.

“I thought it through in the sense that matters.” Zinnia snapped. “I just didn’t think about trivialities like who sleeps where.”

“Well, if you’re really fine with it, you can come to my house.”

“And meet your family.”

Olivier, despite herself, couldn’t help but reroll her eyes. “Unfortunately, yes.”

Zinnia eyed her quietly for a few seconds.

“But not as your girlfriend, is that right?”

Olivier didn’t honestly know how to feel. Of course, her plans had counted on this. If the military couldn’t ever know Zinnia was a civilian dressed in their uniform—now for her own protection more than anything else, since Olivier couldn’t bear to think what they could do to her if she was known as General Armstrong’s girlfriend—, Olivier’s family couldn’t be aware of it for very different reasons. The most important of those reasons was Mrs. Armstrong, who Olivier didn’t expect to have changed much.
“This isn’t leisure. For either one of us. I couldn’t care less about formalities with my family, but, truth be told, it won’t help our case if they know. They might report us, they might … do worse than that, too.” She shook her head. “In general terms, it wouldn’t be pleasant. You’ll need to be my adjutant in their eyes too. It’s all I can offer you where we’re going.”

“I’ll do what needs to be done, I told you. Does it hurt? Yeah, a little. But trusting you, this is bigger than I know. And it’s enough that you’ve acceded to me coming with you to see … whatever this is through.”

“Good. Because they really wouldn’t let you stay at their house if you didn’t. And as you can understand, I wouldn’t look forward to that.”

Zinnia giggled as if the previous conversation had never taken place.

“I’m your girlfriend.” Once the sound of that word would have sent the two of them into suppressed hysterics.

“You’re my disaster to tidy up right now…” Olivier muttered to herself.

Zinnia raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. “Romantic.”

Despite that, it wasn’t very long before Zinnia tired of the sights outside the train and the book she’d taken with her and decidedly sat down next to Olivier, leaning towards her like a cat asking for cuddles.

Olivier might have growled, but after rolling her eyes for the umpteenth time that day, she lifted her right arm and wrapped it around Zinnia’s back as she rubbed her head against Olivier’s shoulders.

“For a moment,” Zinnia said softly, “I could almost forget…” She didn’t finish her sentence, and she didn’t need to. Olivier knew exactly what she meant.

She sighed.

“Me too, flower girl. Me too…”

But there was no forgetting in this scenario, there was only one thing Olivier could do: be the woman everyone thought she was and face this head-on. There would be no time for relaxing or worrying, there would only be the warning signs of danger lurking and the knowledge that if she didn’t do well, she couldn’t stop it. And then everything would fall into chaos. The country, her life, the people she cared about. She’d sent Miles to watch over a murderous alchemist, left Buccaneer behind in the soon-to-be battlefield and brought Zinnia right into the heat of pre-battle.

She’d risked their lives individually by making the choices that she had. There was no forgetting why. There was no rest.

But, even so, all the sleep she hadn’t caught up on since the year had started ended up reaching her, panting with its tongue out after miles and miles of running to get to her. Zinnia noticed the muscles on Olivier’s neck slowly loosening until the head atop it rested close to Zinnia’s and she let out a breath that, in a way, she’d been holding for days, little by little, unable to fully exhale.

Olivier needed a break. It was an unalienable truth. The surviving soldiers from the Drachma expedition had rested and eaten under doctor’s orders, Olivier’s few moments of leisure had been cruelly stripped out of her own hands when the kids had shown up, filling her mind with more information than it knew what to do with and placing her quite neatly in the middle of several national confrontations. She’d had no time to sit down somewhere and just… feel everything she’d
kept putting on hold. And Zinnia, knowing her well enough by now, had an approximate idea of how much that could be. It would do her a lot of good to just sleep, and this train ride was the perfect chance for it.

Everything would change when they arrived on Central, though. Zinnia sat there, half-holding Olivier in position, half-trying not to fall asleep herself, and she didn’t have the guts to lie to herself about this. Life as she knew it would change the second they got off the train. They would face an unwelcoming environment where they’d be expected to survive without complaint, and in a way it would be harsher than Briggs in the winter. But there was no way around it. She had chosen to be here, so Olivier wouldn’t be alone, so if anything came to happen, they wouldn’t be half a country apart.

Zinnia’s eyes began to close, the blur outside the window already far away from her attention. At least if the worst comes to be, we won’t be alone. Although how much good that would do in real life, she didn’t know.

When she awoke, she felt her cheek was abnormally cold, like a piece of ice had been glued to it. Opening her eyes, she discovered why. She’d had her face leaning directly on the window for what seemed to be a while; there was a mark on the glass.

With a yawn, she sat straight again and noticed what Olivier, already up and about, was doing.

“Why are you half naked?” Zinnia asked, stretching a little. She had the feeling she’d spent quite a while asleep on that window. A shiver went down her spine when she realized what that meant.

“It’s too hot,” Olivier said as if it were the most usual thing in the world to get completely rid of the upper half of her uniform. Apparently, to her it was. Her own was wrinkled in the seat as she sat comfortably, arms crossed.

Zinnia tried not to ogle at the arms for too long in case they noticed and wanted to punch her for it. She wouldn’t survive a punch right now.

“Can’t you feel it?” Olivier asked.

Zinnia looked around, trying to. Then she shook her head and Olivier let out a dry chuckle; her hair was cute when she did that.

“I’d forgotten about it,” Olivier said. “The… warmth.”

“You can say ‘the heat’, it’s fine, I won’t make a joke.”

“I don’t trust you around certain words anymore.”

“Yet you trust me with the bare view of your shoulders.” Zinnia bit her lip for show. “Cheeky.”

At that, Olivier smirked—her face, now that Zinnia was paying close attention, was no longer a mask of desperation and exhaustion—and proceeded to sit herself back against Zinnia’s side.

Cheeky, like Zinnia had said, Olivier tucked one of the locks of brown hair behind Zinnia’s ear and then allowed her hand to travel down to the line of buttons keeping Zinnia’s borrowed uniform in place.

“See?” Zinnia said, muffling a giggle. “Cheeky.”
“I feel that is a very disproportionate word to describe me…” Olivier murmured as she began to undo the buttons one by one.

“Why? You really do have no shame. Walking to what you say can be our deaths and yet partaking in your absolute adoration for girls on a crowded train.”

When she got to the last one, Olivier’s hand found its rightful place, stroking Zinnia’s neck.

“One girl.”

“Girls,” Zinnia repeated. “More concretely, one.”

“And we’re in a private compartment.”

“You will not say that when I make you scream.”

“Rest assured,” Olivier said seductively. “I am almost always screaming inside my head.”

Zinnia laughed, but she didn’t play coy anymore. She gently grabbed Olivier’s hand on her neck and brought those supple fingers to her lips to kiss.

“It’ll be a different kind of screaming,” she promised. “One you won’t want people to hear.”

“If you tear any scream out of me, I will owe you an apology. But I don’t think you can.”

And Zinnia moved faster than Olivier was used to. She went in to tickle Olivier treacherously right where most people couldn’t handle it, at her side, but Olivier watched her impassively try and fail to make her so much as squeak.

“Are you sure you’re a real person?” Zinnia asked between giggles. “No one is immune to that.”

Just as impassively, Olivier sneaked a finger out to poke at Zinnia’s side and give her a taste of her own medicine. Zinnia was not as quiet as she had been.

“Is this a battle you want to start, flower girl?”

“Another battle? No, thanks,” she said, trying to push Olivier’s relentless fingers away and failing at that too. “I’m too busy trying to fend this particularly strong woman off.”

Olivier managed to pin her down on the seats and lean above her, hair dangling at one side of her face. She couldn’t help but look deep into Zinnia’s eyes. No matter how often she looked at them, they were still as breath-taking. They told the stories that Zinnia herself was not able to put to paper.

“And how are you faring?”

“Poorly?” Zinnia asked in a mutter. Olivier began to descend upon her very slowly, so that it would look like she wasn’t moving. But it became obvious to Zinnia when she had her at mere inches away from her face. “Could you imagine if someone walked in on us right now? The terrible and so-feared Ice Queen and—”

She paused for a moment and wrinkled her bow beautifully.

“How would you describe me?” she asked.

Olivier did not move, did not hesitate.
“The woman that thawed the ice.”

There was a pause that seemed to last eternally. Zinnia wasn’t too sure she’d heard right. Olivier could not have said such a thing out loud, being as private and grumpy as she was. And yet the words were out there for her to hear.

Blushing a little, Zinnia continued as if nothing had happened.

“Okay, then the terrible and so-feared Ice Queen and the woman that thawed her ice—” It didn’t go unnoticed to Olivier that Zinnia had changed the determiner for a possessive. “—twisted together horizontally on the surface of a seat.”

“If they saw,” Olivier said firmly. “I would gauge their eyes out with my sword.”

Zinnia groaned. “You were doing so well…”

“If they saw,” Olivier insisted. “You’d get flustered and I’d get angry and the quickest way to solve that would be to stop them from seeing any more.”

“Gauging their eyes out with a sword?” Zinnia asked. “That’s like trying to play golf with a toothpick.”

Olivier was about to make a move when she felt the train stopping.

“Are we there yet?” she asked. It couldn’t be that they’d slept so much, or could it? After all, she’d been on the brink of fainting from exhaustion, and Zinnia was a heavy sleeper.

Zinnia pushed her away and sat down, doing all of her buttons again.

“Looks like it.”

Outside the window, the landscape had changed. It was still somewhat green, a duller color than she’d expected, but the vastness wasn’t made of nature. A city loomed up ahead, a circle of gray streets and blue skies, its buildings never too tall or wide but still impressive. It was, so they said, the most modern urban core in Amestris.

“Central City…” Olivier mumbled. “We meet again.”

“Aren’t you… going to get dressed?”

Olivier looked down at the state she was in and almost laughed. If she walked out like this, who knew what the world would think of her? Probably that she had gone mad. No one would stop to consider that she was too used to the chill of the north and that, to her, this mild winter of the south was almost summer.

Reluctantly, she grabbed her jacket and put it on.

“Not because I want to.”

When the train fully came to a halt, most people were already crowding at the exits, carrying heavy luggage and taking up more space than they should. Olivier and Zinnia were almost the last to get out onto the platforms.

“Hasn’t changed much,” Olivier commented, looking around at the station she hadn’t seen in many years. The same floors remained, the same panels, the same signs directing the passersby to the right platforms. She could have been frozen in time, back in 1900, for all she knew.
With a sigh, she lifted their suitcase from the floor.

“Come on,” she said to Zinnia. “Let’s find a car.”

The city seemed smaller than it was when you were entering it, yet when you were in its heart, slowly navigating its streets, it felt immense, a labyrinth for beginners.

Zinnia, who usually didn’t much get to visit Central, kept looking up at the buildings to admire the architecture that was so different from the northern or the southern. Here, the houses were not small, there were blocks of them adorned with columns and sculptures, aside from the important constructions of the city. It was a place of affordable luxury for those who lived in it, nothing like Zinnia’s town a few miles west of there.

Then, the car brought them to a very different array of houses. The ones in the heart of the city were built together, side to side, and without little room for trees. In contrast, this new area of the city, a bit more far away from the city center, was deeply inhabited. From time a time, a mansion appeared in the distance, joined to the road by a cobblestone path, surrounded by trees and bushes and flowers.

It came to Zinnia that they weren’t going to be staying anywhere near to normal, that she was dating an Armstrong.

“Wait,” she said, just to make sure. “You live here?”

“Don’t be silly,” Olivier said. “I haven’t lived here since I was a girl.”

And even when she’d been one, during the last years of her adolescence she’d been at the academy.

But all Zinnia could imagine was houses the size of palaces and clothes her own family could not have afforded, as well as a rampant feeling of commodity.

“Lord Almighty,” she gasped, “you’re how rich???”

“My family is.” It was, to Olivier, an important distinction. All she had left of the wealth she’d been able to enjoy as a child was the name that went with it. The rest of it she’d given up on—gladly—when she’d left for the north to never return until now.

“My parents own a butchery…” Zinnia mumbled, looking down at her hands. Hands that had cut meat and learned to throw punches and knives, hands that had washed clothes and dishes and picked pebbles from the ground to play with when her parents couldn’t give her toys.

“Mine still live here. This is the family home.” Olivier sighed and said to herself: “Not for long…”

Whatever came to be, she knew well enough that the Armstrongs couldn’t stay in Central. Even if Olivier managed to stop the Führer’s plans, no one was to guarantee that her family wouldn’t suffer at his hands. And she was no animal to let them meet that face unaided.

“Does your brother still live here?”

Olivier shook her head. The last she knew of him was that he’d been destined at Eastern Command.

“It’s just my parents and Catherine.”

“Ooooh, I get to be properly introduced at last, then.” Her tone was bubbly despite the
circumstances.

Olivier frowned.

“Don’t push it,” she warned her. “There’s plenty of trains in this city. I could put you in one.”

“Okay. No introductions?” Zinnia tried again.

Olivier sighed.

“Introductions,” she said. “But like we discussed. You merely work for me.”

The car finally stopped at a black gate that was the only opening in a thick layer of bushes around the perimeter of the house and its grounds. While Olivier got out of the car to get the luggage, Zinnia remained on her seat, taking a quick peak at what hid behind it all. Her mouth dropped all the way to the floor.

The door of the car opened.

“Impressed?” Olivier said.

Zinnia just blinked as a response, clutching the box with her knives until Olivier offered her a hand to take and almost pulled her out of the vehicle.

“Let’s just say it’s hard to take in.”

“Wait till you see the indoors…” Olivier muttered.

She paid the driver a generous tip and retrieved their luggage from the trunk.

Hard to take in, Zinnia had called it. Olivier agreed. Even if this was technically hers, even if she’d grown up here, she looked at the mansion that waited just a little further and had to psyche herself up to feel like she was up to the standards the house could ask of her.

This had never been a home. Perhaps it would have been wiser to rent two rooms at headquarters. Now, she was expected to walk in, with Zinnia ogling at everything with writer curiosity, and not crumble at the memories, at the failures she hadn’t forgotten, just postponed remembering.

She opened the gate for Zinnia and the metal sound of it closing snapped her out of it. She was here on a mission upon which rested the future of the nation, and she didn’t have the luxury of hesitation.

Home or not, she had a right to reside her with whomever she chose. And she had a right to feel like she belonged, even if she never would.

Walking through the gardens, Olivier found herself deep in her core, squared her soldiers and modified her stance. She was a general of the Amestrian military, she had power, she commanded men and frightened civilians and soldiers alike. She was no longer the child that had roamed this place.

“Did you play here when you were a child?” Zinnia asked with a smile. She had never seen such a sumptuous garden before; she was used to orchards where she’d grown up, nothing more.

Olivier laughed dryly.

“We weren’t allowed outside much,” she replied. “Gardeners, apparently, are expensive.”
She chuckled to herself now. With all the money her family obviously had, it had never been a matter of gardeners.

“Oh,” Zinnia just said.

When they reached the marble staircase that led to the entrance of the house, Olivier stopped before facing the first step and looked Zinnia in the eye.

“Are you sure you’re up for this? It’s not too late.”

Zinnia shook her head. “I told you, I’m fine with it. But maybe you should ask yourself if you are. At the end of the day, it’s your family. They’re nothing to me.”

“They’re nothing to me either,” Olivier said, taking the lead.

Zinnia stared at her as she did and kept the truth to herself. A truth that wasn’t hers to carry, yet she did. Because Olivier never would. Her superpower was caring, whether she wanted to or not, whether the people in question deserved it or not. And however estranged she was from the people inside that mansion, Zinnia couldn’t doubt for one second that Olivier felt something about them.

Olivier pushed the doors open and a wave of wealth reached out into the outdoors. Zinnia just caught a first quick glimpse and she almost fell to the floor from the shock. It was… huge and so well adorned. She saw a staircase curving to the first floor and a vast foyer.

“Come on, flower girl,” Olivier urged her on.

When Zinnia came in, she also noticed the temperature change. It was nowhere near as cold as the street, but not unbearably hot either. Just… the perfect amount.

No one was waiting for them inside. Olivier hadn’t been expecting otherwise, she hadn’t really sent word that she’d be coming to their house. She didn’t dwell much on the place. It was exactly as she remembered it, posh and expensive and pristinely clean. Catherine wouldn’t have probably been allowed to be a kid either, like every other Armstrong child.

She could feel Zinnia quietly observing it all, drinking it all in for the first time, and was almost tempted to tell her to focus. There was little in the house that had a soul. Everything was impersonal, meant to be seen and not touched. Except, perhaps, for her father’s library.

Olivier wondered briefly where he might be.

And upon opening the doors to one of the living rooms, she had her question answered.

Her parents were both sitting in a blue couch laced with touches of gold. Her father was reading the paper, an image that she remembered very clearly from her youth, and her mother sipped tea from a beautiful expensive cup. When they heard the doors open, their heads turned.

Olivier’s mother’s fingers suddenly forgot they were holding a cup and it crashed against the floor, spilling tea all over it.

“Olivier,” her father cried. “To what do we owe this… pleasure?”

Mrs. Armstrong’s face wrinkled in a grimace that seemed to disagree with her husband’s wording.

Now, Olivier moved to the side and let Zinnia come in.

“Business. The Führer has requested my presence,” she said.
Her father stood up from the couch, unsure as to what to do. He hadn’t seen his daughter in fifteen years, he should have done more than to hesitate. Olivier tried not to resent him for it, she tried to remember that those years meant little now to her, that she’d risen above her upbringing. She was a woman that had made herself.

“It must be very important if he has called you here,” he said, finally walking to her.

They stared at each other for a moment, measuring what the other hid beneath their calm expressions.

Finally, Mr. Armstrong gulped and leaned towards his daughter to kiss her cheeks. Zinnia was disappointed at the whole scene, fifteen years without seeing each other and this was his reaction? She’d expected nothing else from the mother, but Olivier’s father had never been spoken of too terribly.

Mrs. Armstrong, true to what Zinnia knew of her, remained seated, legs neatly crossed under a jewel of a dress, something Zinnia’s own mother would never even see in her lifetime.

Olivier turned to her now, defiant. Or, at least, appearing so.

“Mother,” she only said.

Mrs. Armstrong only stared unpleasantly. She blinked, then finally spoke:

“And who is this you bring with you?”

Olivier turned to Zinnia, who froze where she was when she realized she was partially being addressed.

“She is my adjutant,” Olivier said. “She will be staying with us.”

Mrs. Armstrong’s expression soured very visibly.

“Oh,” she said, “so you will not be leaving for… Central Command?”

“No,” Olivier only said.

“Well, then,” Mr. Armstrong intervened with a big kind smile. “You are very welcome. Your room has been preserved to perfection, I hope you will still find it to your liking.”

Olivier smiled. “Thank you, father.”

“And your adjutant can very well occupy one of the guest rooms. I will gladly inform the maid,” he said.

Mrs. Armstrong smiled. It was not a nice smile, it was twisted and, in a way, untrue, as if she’d forced it out.

“She may see to it after she has cleaned this up.”

Olivier didn’t need to hear any more to know it was time to leave her family alone for now.

“If you’ll excuse us…” she said, tugging at Zinnia to get out of the room.

They made for the staircase in silence. Zinnia did honestly not know what to feel. The encounter struck her as tense, very tense, nothing she’d have expected of any other normal, loving family. The Armstrongs had spoken to each other like Zinnia talked to strangers, courteously but distantly.
On their way to the first floor, she dared to finally ask:

“Is it always like this?”

Olivier nodded quickly.

“How did you stand it?”

“I didn’t,” Olivier reminded her. “I ran away.”

The rest of the way, Zinnia didn’t think of asking again. Every inch of the house was covered in riches, things any mortal couldn’t just acquire, but also the lack of love the children of the Armstrong family had gone without for all of their lives.

On the stairway, though, they crossed paths with the last of the Armstrong children. Zinnia thought at first that the tiredness from the travelling had worn her down too much and she was seeing things. It was like staring into the eyes of a much, much younger Olivier. A younger version of her that wore a dress with ease and smiled pleasantly at them both, her hair styled to perfection, curling at the ends, her eyes only slightly wider than Olivier’s. They would have looked like twins if there hadn’t been such a huge age difference between them.

“Sister…” Olivier said. Zinnia thought she detected some hesitation in her voice. It must be Catherine, then. The two sisters had never met before, had only ever seen each other in pictures, or, at least, Olivier had seen photographs of Catherine her father sent her up north. Maybe Catherine had never even seen Olivier’s face, because Zinnia doubted Mrs. Armstrong kept many in the house.

“Sister, what a lovely surprise!” Catherine said, bowing to Olivier and Zinnia.

Zinnia merely stood there, wondering what Olivier would say to her, what could possibly be said in the first place to someone she’d never met before, even if blood bonded them forever.

“You are so grown,” Olivier said, serious as ever. “The last I knew of you, you were but a baby.”

And now she was the living image of Olivier herself. Oh, how much Gwendolyn Armstrong must have enjoyed that, turning a shadow of her first child into the woman she’d always dreamed of having as a daughter and never been able to have.

“Time passes for all of us,” Catherine said with a pleasant smile. “But, I must say, looking at you is like looking into a mirror. Your face remains the same as in the pictures Alex showed me.”

Suddenly, Olivier’s expression frozen. Alex… He had continued to speak about her after everything, hadn’t he? He had fed Catherine with stories about their family when it was almost complete, when she had been the missing piece. By then, Olivier had already been away.

“It is nice to finally meet,” Olivier said. “But the years haven’t been as kind to me as they have been to you.” Gently, she approached her sister and tipped her chin up. “You will soon understand.”

Catherine smiled again and nodded.

“I look forward to seeing you again,” she said. “Will you be staying long?”

“It is too soon to say,” Olivier said, but she hoped this would only last a few days. She didn’t think she was ready to stomach her family for longer than that, even if part of her did miss the chance to get to know her youngest sister. The same part of Olivier that recognized that Catherine wasn’t yet spoiled by their mother to her full extent, that she had still time to become a worthy successor for the
family in due time. If only Olivier could be there to help mold her into a woman of her own volition that the family would proudly crowd their heir.

After that, Catherine bowed again and descended the stairs. Zinnia ad Olivier all but shared a glance.

Since the maid would need time to prepare her own room, Zinnia was shown first to Olivier’s. In the same style of the rest of the place, this room felt… different to her. Well-furnished and yet empty until Olivier had walked in, then everything had made sense. Zinnia could close her eyes and see Olivier’s childhood and adolescence unfold before her. She could see a toddler learning to walk and a young girl studying at her desk, a woman barely just bloomed who refused to be who she wasn’t.

Contrarily, Olivier didn’t see herself in this room. She saw a botanist dressed in denim and violet, sprawled over that bed that hadn’t been touched in years and going curiously through Olivier’s scant things with the avid eyes of a new lover.

“We’ll get out of here one day, you and I,” Ianthe insisted. That day she’d ditched the bed, preferring the carpeted floor. That way she could study the patterns, discern how many types of green it was made of, and be deprived of stimuli on the big bed where the only focus she’d have was Olivier.

“I though you liked Central.”

Ianthe stretched like a cat.

“I like it fine,” she said. “But there’s a whole world out there. And I bet you’re dying to get out of this town, too.”

Olivier didn’t need to corroborate that. Ianthe knew plenty well what Olivier’s goals had always been, going away a couple of years, leaving the family home.

“It could just be a vacation,” Ianthe continued. “Something small or something big. I’d let you decide.”

“Do botanists travel?”

Ianthe crab-walked to the edge of the bed and leaned both arms atop it, looking at Olivier with feigned innocence.

“They might one day.” Olivier moved on the bed, sliding closer to her, hypnotized by Ianthe’s presence. “And… soldiers might stop changing destinations all the time. We could meet each other halfway.”

It was a beautiful dream, to remain together for that long, to cherish what they had long enough to meet again somewhere else, when Olivier was already free of her family and Ianthe had built herself the educated green life she’d always wanted. Olivier might be captain in some tiny province and Ianthe might teach environmental practices in the city center. And they would see each other when night fell, to see the stars in each other’s eyes.

Olivier couldn’t help it, she leaned forward.

“Meet me halfway now…”
In the present, Olivier shook her head to get the memory a little further from her. More came in its place. Many more, of conversations and places and smells. Days that were very old now in her brain, moments that belonged to a nineteen-year-old that wasn’t here anymore.

*Yet the house should still be,* Olivier thought. She could visit it sometime, see the state it was in, if people still lived in it. If she found Ianthe there, after all these years, she might be able to ask her the question she had in that letter than she’d never received an answer to. And she could still use those answers, she could still use some closure.

“Cozy,” Zinnia said, sitting right under Olivier’s nose on the edge of the bed where years ago Olivier and Ianthe had kissed in the name of a dream.

“It’s bigger than our room at the fort,” Olivier commented.

“*Much* bigger. A whole troop would fit in here.”

She placed the suitcase on the bed and started opening it.

“Even though you’re getting your own room, you can come see me.”

“Oh yeah? I can break the rules at night?”

Olivier nodded tensely.

“*Only* at night. And only if you’re discreet.”

Zinnia stood up and tried to wrap her in a hug from behind, in a display of, ironically, indiscretion. Olivier was hard to hug, she was big and stiff and didn’t melt easily when she wasn’t completely enraptured in the emotion.

“Well, then count on it, because I’m not sure I know how to sleep alone anymore. And if my bed is as big as yours…”

Olivier let Zinnia put her arms around her, wrapped Zinnia’s with her own. Because indiscretion was a reality as long as these four walls encased them safe, separated them from the world that awaited downstairs.

“We should go see if the maid has readied it.”

“We should…”

They remained without moving for several seconds, then they broke apart, knowing full well it would be a while until they could be together like that again.

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Olivier couldn’t stay much longer. The Führer awaited her, and she didn’t plan to play skittish for the whole of her stay, although it didn’t please her to have to leave Zinnia behind with her family. It wouldn’t be an enjoyable situation for any of the parties involved, that was for sure.

As she got in the car again and gave instructions to be taken to Central Command, she tried to still herself for what was coming. An inspection, no doubt, as well as a proper interrogation. It shouldn’t be necessary, since she had made sure that the seed of suspicion was well-planted in Bradley’s mind.
Kimblee had played his role within Olivier’s plans better than she could have hoped, running to his boss with the news without thinking.

She prepared herself to surprise Bradley in a way that he wouldn’t expect. Whatever the cost had been to be here, she had paid it knowing she would get to make up for it in the end. If this worked, if she succeeded, she would be much closer to putting a stop to this crazy demeanor.

Everything she’d done, everything she knew she’d have to do, in the name of the one thing she had vowed to do: save and protect. She didn’t once in the car ride question her ability to do so in this different context. Her duty was what it was, and she would have to rise to meet it. She was a bear of the north, and the south would not strip her of her fur nor tear off her teeth and claws. If anything, the south was a whetstone.

As soon as she was inside the headquarters, she could appreciate how little anything had changed since the last time she’d walked these corridors. People still came and went and assembled, the ornaments were in the exact same places, gathering dust and mold, and it still all reeked of conceit and ambition. In their right quantities, both could help a person aspire to become something else. In Central, though, conceit and ambition were the burdens of its communities.

Olivier made her way among the Central men, an obvious foreigner who didn’t want to mingle. She looked here and there and only saw ruined potential. This country’s military could hope to be a protective force, the shield that kept the people safe, an institution for good. Instead, Central was the cusp of corruption and disloyalty. Of false gods and untrue strength.

A few corridors away from the Führer’s office, she failed to part the crowds.

Three men faced her at the juncture between two corridors. One, she recognized. Small, black-haired, smug.

“Mustang,” she only said, distasteful.

“General Armstrong,” he said, surprised but not hostilely. “What a pleasure to see you again.”

“I can’t say the same.”

Mustang only smiled, as if he didn’t take the insult to heart. Then he turned to his companions: “I will be right with you.”

When they left, Olivier held Mustang’s cautious but intrigued gaze. They hadn’t seen each other in years, and yet the look in Mustang’s eyes remained the same. He was a foolish, power-drunk imbecile with perhaps too good a heart to handle and poor decision-making skills. Olivier would have liked him if he hadn’t been ascending that fast up the ranks and with that stupid face of his.

“What brings you here?” Mustang asked.

“Führer’s orders.”

Mustang’s eyebrows arched. “Really? And you’ve come all the way south to be obedient?”

“I’m a good girl,” Olivier just said, her face the most serious Mustang had ever seen it. “What brings you here? I thought you were permanently posted at Eastern Command.”

He shrugged.

“Merit brings a man everywhere.”
“Did you kill many people this time, Mustang?”

His face soured, surely at the memory of Ishval’s fire columns he had helped spark into life, but she knew he didn’t have the guts to fight her now, least of all here, where that memory had been suppressed.

“Anyway,” he said. “Now that you’re here for what I assume is a few days, how about a friendly gathering some time? For old time’s sake. I’d love to be caught up about my Briggs pals.”

She stared at him. “If you’re trying to be funny, it’s not working.”

He smiled like a fool.

“You must be, after all, stunning up close.”

She couldn’t help but think that she was already up close, hence his compliments were falling short because of the logistics behind them.

“What do you say, general?” he pressed on. “I’m sure you and I could have plenty to discuss if… left alone.”

This time, the smile was not only foolish but cheeky. And this time, Olivier didn’t fall for the idiocy that Mustang was exuding. This time, she saw past that. His insistence on meeting her somewhere private certainly didn’t entail his tastes had improved nor that he was interested in whatever idle conversation she might be willing to muster up in his presence. This could only mean her aunt’s message had gotten to its recipient.

At last.

Her brow furrowed.

“Plenty, indeed…”

Mustang nodded diligently.

“I will then make an appearance at your address sometime.”

“I will be looking forward to it,” she said, not meaning it at all. But what needed to be done would be for the sake of her country, for the sake of the men she had left behind. She nodded to him and meant to keep walking: “Mustang.”

“Armstrong…”

She had to admit, his tactics hadn’t been all that wrong. Whoever had come close would have just assumed he, like many others, felt an inexplicable and unknown attraction to a woman who could snap his neck if she so willed it. And, in the end, what needed to be communicated had been. Mustang had let her know he was up to date as to her intentions. That was all she needed.

She continued towards the Führer’s office.

She stood before the door and took a deep breath. The future of the nation awaited.

She knocked.

“Yes?” came a deep rich voice from inside.

“Come in, come in.”

Olivier did. She was received by the dimness.

The call had been diverted from Olivier’s office, now belonging to some moustached Central dog that already thought himself boss. Buccaneer could have perfectly well imagined why she didn’t want him to talk in that office; those phone conversations were permanently recorded, just in case. It was safer for whatever bits of information Olivier had now to reach its destination through the public phones on Briggs.

Buccaneer had almost run to pick one of them up.

“General?”

“Are you able to talk now?”

Buccaneer looked around. Everyone was busy coming and going, no one would pay attention to him here. And, if they did, they would only be able to hear one side of the conversation. The side that received information, not the side giving it.

“Yes, sir.” He barely had time to ask her if she could talk safely as well. What she had to say was the priority and had to be protected from the wrong ears.

“Good,” she said, her voice urgent. “I’m going to have to stay here far longer than I’d anticipated.”

They had been hoping for a few days’ worth of incursion, enough time for Olivier to ask the right questions to the right people and answer those that were posed in her direction in a way that she no longer remained incriminated for the murder she had committed.

He barely knew how to articulate his puzzlement.

“What?”

“The Führer wants me in his senior staff. He knows the truth of what happened to Raven as well, but I’ve managed to make him believe that I’m one of them and that I will serve their cause.” She snorted.

“But that’s—”

She didn’t allow him to finish.

“He’s deflected my authority on Briggs to the idiots who are there with you now. I need you to make sure nothing seems suspicious there for as long as I’m gone. Everything should go on normally until I’m back. Do not let them believe you still have reason to be loyal to me.”

“You—you can count on us, of course,” he stuttered. He hadn’t expected her to ask that of him and the rest. If there was something that Briggs men would defend with tooth and nail that was their devotion and loyalty to their general. And if she saw it fit to have them pretend otherwise—

“Anything for you.”

“I will be keeping you informed, as promised. But for now those are the news. You’ll need to hold
on on your own for an indefinite amount of time.”

At Olivier’s pause, Buccaneer licked his lips. It was now or never. Whatever her situation was, she wouldn’t willingly divulge it unless asked directly.

“General, are you safe yourself?”

She paused. He thought he’d taken her aback with that question. She always forgot, this woman did, that she wasn’t just a beacon, she was a leader who was loved. As fearlessly as she led.

In the end, she broke the silence with a lengthy exhale.

“Don’t worry about me, soldier.”

She hung up at once, leaving him no room to say anything. Buccaneer took a deep breath. He knew Briggs wouldn’t suffer under the current circumstances, even if the people in the fort would. They were to continue normally, as if Olivier hadn’t left them, as if she hadn’t left them to delve into what could very soon be the second war Briggs was to face this year. And she was alone out there, alone against all danger, her only backup miles and miles away, caged inside their own four walls under the rule of the enemy. With her prolonged stay in Central as a double agent for Bradley, Buccaneer had no doubt that it was starting, the decay of everything he knew. And, as per usual, he was powerless against it.

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, I can't believe we've made it to Chapter 50! ^^

I can't believe in 14 weeks you're all going to read the last line. And I can't believe I was the one to write that last line and the one that's still not over this fic ending XD. So many emotions!

Five more chapters and we finish Arc III to move on to the IVth and final one. And, for reference, those five chapters contain about half of the Arc's word count (I got super scared revising this last chapter, I was like 'please don't tell me I got five more 10k-chapters ahead of me' XP, but yeah I do.)
For two weeks, Olivier sat around a council table to hear others discuss foreign wars. That was the current state of affairs that occupied the minds of the men she had hoped to con some information out of. Drachma and Creta and Aerugo and the desert, crowd control at Central, and little else that she hadn’t known already. It occurred to her, after some days, that it might as well just have to do with her own presence there. The big shots might be shy, reluctant to discuss important matters with a woman amongst them. With a woman who was feared throughout the whole country, and rightfully so. No matter where her allegiance seemed to be, whoever allies she had still refused to share with her what they knew.

Things changed, however, when someone else walked in the council room. Someone a foot taller than anyone Olivier had seen, dressed in pristine white clothes that blurred with the whiteness of his beard and hair. Someone whose voice asked disinterestedly about the last few points of the map that would require completion before the alchemical circle was to be put to good use.

Briggs, Olivier though to herself. They still have to hit Briggs.

The fort had been promised bloodshed, and it expected to be delivered exactly so. Hundreds of people dead, the snowed-in valley covered in bodies from both countries. It wouldn’t be a war to these people, they had nothing to lose in, but it would still be a grueling spectacle and, in a way, the planned nature of it made it genocide.

When the new arrival, the man in white with the inhuman eyes, asked her about her opinion on this conflict. She held his gaze for longer than he had expected her to.

“The soldiers at Briggs are well-trained,” she said, her voice unwavering. If he wanted her to flinch, to be a coward and be drenched in the fear that probably wet the heart of every one of the men in the room, then he had come to bark up the wrong tree. “Whatever comes to them, they will make you proud.”

They will make you delirious. Whatever bloodshed was coming to knock on the doors of her fort, Olivier had faith. She forced herself to. If she lost that, then she would have lost everything last breath of life that made her keep going, that made her invest time and effort into this con. Without it, she would return home, flee from the danger she had ventured into, and let them come to her instead. She would fight the war she was supposed to, not one she’d been thrust at of late, and the outcome of it wouldn’t be something that she lost sleep over.

Unlike this. Two weeks, and now she had permanent bags under her eyes. She liked to think it added to her terrifying appearance, but when days later the council finally spoke in clearer terms of the situation, arranging for a tour underneath Central Command specially for her, she began to think that maybe all they saw was weakness.

And Olivier couldn’t understand what part of holding one’s ground on a minimum of sleep was weak. On the contrary, it reinforced her strengths.

Evenings were quiet in their side of town. Not that life in general wasn’t. The Armstrongs could
have no complaint about their surroundings, even less so about their own routines within the house. Gwendolyn always had the maid prepare her some tea when the sun went down as she read through the gossip section of the magazines that were in vogue lately. Exactly fifteen minutes after she had started, her husband left his office to meet her in the living room, carrying his own paper to read. For many years, they had oiled and cared for this mechanism in their lives. Whatever pastime Mrs. Armstrong spent her mornings on and whatever important matter Mr. Armstrong was to deal with during the day, the setting sun brought them together again, not in the fancy of younger years when they had not had a gray hair on their heads, but in the way old couples regard each other after a lifetime.

They didn’t speak much, other than to comment on some news or specially interesting piece of gossip. They had learned to enjoy the silence and to know what it meant when it was broken, precisely at 8 pm every night, by the maid announcing dinner was served.

On this particular evening, expecting such an announcement, they barely lifted their heads from whatever they were reading when they heard the doors open. After registering what that meant and processing that it did not mean dinner was ready, both of their heads turned to face the door. Who could be so rude as to enter their house without knocking first?

A man walked in. Gwendolyn had to look twice. No man other than her husband and son had stepped foot in this house except to attend their annual balls.

But, right now, a uniformed man of apt height and build was in their hall. And the Armstrongs’ eldest daughter soon joined him, closing the door behind her.

To Gwendolyn’s surprise, her husband spoke in a mumble quite improper of him before she could:

“Look at this, she might not be as much of a spinster as we thought, Gwendolyn.”

She snorted. “She will remain one until marriage.”

“It is too early to speak of marriage.”

Olivier, walking past them, almost shook her head in public.

“Ignore them,” she said to Mustang, who was pretending very subtly not to be paying attention to the décor. Perhaps he hoped to find answers to the mystery of her in the house where she hadn’t lived in years.

His blush gave him away too quickly. He was, no doubt, flattered that her parents thought him able to handle such a woman. Of course, he didn’t know that her parents might just be the only people on Amestris that didn’t think of her as any kind of woman that wasn’t a poor and lunatic spinster, a black sheep to their all-white herd.

“I hope we can talk privately here?”

“We can meet elsewhere if you’d be more comfortable,” she said acidly.

“There’s no need. Here is fine.”

She took him to her father’s lesser office upstairs, which she had taken over since she’d been back. Philip Armstrong would have no need for it as long as he could keep his library.

Mustang took a look around at the books that were, incidentally, also piled up on the shelves there. “Figures what money buys.”
“Things,” Olivier said matter-of-factly. “Stop trying to make idle conversation. You’re here for one thing only.”

“That’s right,” he acceded. “To contrast information. So, what can you tell me about the plan?”

“It involves complex alchemy, far more so than we could ever comprehend. Father has spent four hundred years building a gigantic alchemic circle to make a philosopher stone, and he is ready to defend his plans with the lives of our military.” Despite the faces he was making, she continued. “Those are the main parts of it... Motives, specific schemes, everything else is left to be discussed.

Mustang smirked.

“What is so funny?”

He sat back on his chair, gaining confidence the longer he spent in her presence.

“Edward Elric contacted me. He said to spread this around to the right people. I strongly suspect that would include you as well.”

Olivier was getting impatient and had a hunch that he had patiently waited for her to finish so he could surprise her with more detailed information than she had gotten. Every day was dick-measuring contest with him.

“Speak, Mustang.”

It was time for her to find out what still hadn’t been revealed in the council. Whatever details Mustang had, they must be good, or else he would have gone forth with them, playing no games. Sometimes she doubted he had gotten it through his thick skull that this was no simulation, no drill. This was war.

“Father’s *plans* will take full form on the spring equinox,” he continued. “That much is certain for now. We have until then to get ready, and to draft a counterplan.”

“How do you propose we stop a god? Because if you have anything to say, I’d like to hear it,” she said scornfully.

“He’s not a god. Not according to the kid. Close to, but not exactly.”

“I don’t understand what a puny difference such as that one could make.”

“It means we play our parts. We’re in positions of power, we can act against this, try to stop it.”

“How, Mustang? The only thing that can fight alchemy is alchemy itself. Unless you’re suggest we set you loose to burn this city to the ground, which would please me terribly—”

“I’m not the sole alchemist that pitches into this,” he interrupted, his voice gravely.

She blinked.

“The kids?” However much they knew, all Olivier had seen of them was shivering shapes at the back of a cell with plenty to hide and much more yet to find out. “They’re hardly able to get by as it is.”

Mustang shook his head.
“Don’t underestimate them. Edward Elric became a State Alchemist at twelve, and his brother would have been able to pass the exam as well, if he had entered.” Mustang had seen the two of them in action, and he wished he understood how such small humans had been able to amass all the alchemic knowledge they had. Mustang himself had paid a high price for his own abilities, a prize that some days he felt weighed far more than the loss of some limbs. After all, Mustang’s prize, unlike the kid’s, hadn’t been paid by himself. “They’ve been fighting this battle since before they knew of it.”

“I thought they were merely trying to get their bodies back. What else more could there be in this for them?”

Mustang smiled again. “You aim to defend the northern border, and yet you find yourself here at the center of it all. The paths set for us aren’t always easy to foresee.”

“That’s very poetic, Mustang, why don’t you go write a book?” Olivier said without batting an eye, unable to believe him. “We need to stop this war. And we need to know how to stop it before we do.”

“The Elric brothers are gathering people. Trusted allies, I imagine. We will all be here.” Mustang looked up at her. “How much do you know already about Central’s plan? Just what you’ve told me?”

He seemed to at least be taking her seriously now, she’d give him that much. And it was worth taking her seriously for. Her stay in Central might have been short, but she had witnessed more than in fifteen years up in a wall with the bears of the north.

“I’ve seen them,” she spoke quietly. “The monstrosities and their … creator. Sloth, Lust, Pride, Wrath, Greed, Envy, Gluttony, Father. They will be here to stop us. So will the rest of the soldiers on this city. We’ll need to deal with them, too. If this Father isn’t a god, we sure as hell are going to have to be in order to face him and come out on top.”

Mustang allowed himself a sad smile, then pierced her eyes with his own.

“To be honest, general, I’m not entirely sure our goal here is to win. The way I see it, we’re preparing for survival.”

At best, she added in her mind.

He was right, of course. She just didn’t want to voice that aloud.

“Told you long enough,” Buccaneer grumbled, scarf wrapped around his short neck at least three times over.

Miles closed the metal door carefully so it wouldn’t slam and walked to the post where Buccaneer kept watch, ever so vigilant over the horizon and the border. He didn’t need to ask to know that Buccaneer felt like the last man standing.

“I had a few promises to stay true to,” Miles only just said, standing right next to him. He had travelled Amestris, seen the less concealed sides of the Crimson Alchemist, and left his company to return the Elric Brothers to the east. And it had taken longer than he’d thought.

“How about to your promises to me, huh?”
Miles rolled his eyes.  
“I’m back, aren’t I?”  

“Finally,” Buccaneer hissed between his teeth. Too long, he had been alone in this fort, herding the men like sheep, making sure he didn’t have time to feel left behind. With Miles and Olivier gone, his people had been reduced to a whole fort to tend to. His real people had been taken away from him by the war.  

He found no need to distinguish between wars. Everything was, after all, just a result of an ancient war that had made of Amestris an alchemic circle.  

“Catch me up, will you?” Miles asked after a while of just hearing the wind howl. All he knew was what he’d been able to pick up during his mission, but he still hadn’t heard from anyone. Having just been back, his first instinct was to be up to date, back in the old game. Or a new one, little did it matter.  

They were both standing at the literal edge of their world, the dangers of another one reaching out behind the mountains, and it could almost feel like home again, like nothing had changed and nothing ever would again.  

Buccaneer knew better. He had too many years at his back to know that the signs were all out there, clear as day. The man who didn’t notice them did so willingly, an idiot if not a coward.  

“We’re resisting,” he just said at first. “Neither bending nor breaking.”  

Miles exhaled. “Little good that will do. They’re already here.”  

“It helps with morale.”  

“How long will it last?” Miles asked.  

Buccaneer shook his head.  

“We don’t know. The general called, not long ago,” he said. “She said she’s acting like one of them, but she’ll have to keep at it until she’s discovered or until it’s over.”  

“She’s away at the worst possible moment…” Miles muttered.  

Buccaneer scoffed.  

“We’re lucky she’s not dead.”  

“She’s trapped down there, then.”  

“That’s what they wanted, when they took her. To separate her from what they thought makes her strong.” Buccaneer smiled sadly. “They’re wrong about her, as always.”  

“They’re not wrong,” Miles said solemnly. “Our strength lies in our numbers. Isolate one of us and the damage we can do is significantly less than the damage that can be done to us.”  

Buccaneer growled.  

“So, what are you saying? That she is weak without us?”  

Miles looked at the horizon as if it hid the answers to everyone’s questions. He had been at ease for a
long time, at home in this place, with these people, with the woman who had taken him in and now was caged in the lion’s den alone. They had done more than just take her away, they had turned Briggs into another den. “I’m saying we should consider to stop neither bending nor breaking and start doing something else than just waiting.”

“She doesn’t want any of our help, Miles. You know her as well as I do. If she said she was going alone, she wants to do this alone.”

“She wants us safe here,” Miles corrected. “Doesn’t mean she wants to be left alone.”

“I have orders,” Buccaneer insisted. “Unless she commands me to do otherwise, I will stand my ground. We all will.”

Miles stayed in silence for a moment. Buccaneer was usually the first man down to break rules Olivier imposed on him, why was he now defending her choices? Clearly, not because he wanted safety himself, Buccaneer had always had a huge disregard for his personal wellbeing and too high a tolerance for pain. Then had his loyalty finally reached its peak?

“You don’t understand,” Buccaneer added. “You weren’t here to see her go.”

Miles was about to turn to face him when he saw something. When he thought he saw something. Maybe it was all the snow and the rock merging and dancing around one another, making it impossible to discern if anything truly moved in the distances. One shape could easily seem to be something it wasn’t, and the only way to know was to look elsewhere and then return to examine it.

With his heart leaping into his mouth, Miles did. He looked at the blue skies, then back at the mountains in the distance, at the far end of the valley that Briggs severed in half.

His hand fumbled for Buccaneer’s sleeve until he could grip it.

“Buccaneer,” he said breathlessly. “Tell me I’m not right, tell me those aren’t cannons.”

Buccaneer slit his eyes. There was no falling snow, his job as a watcher on the wall wouldn’t be made difficult, the visibility was perfect. His eyes soon met what Miles had been referring to. The moving shapes in the distance, far but distinct.

He found Miles’s hand and took it into his own. If he’d had a right arm, it would have shook just like the left one had started to.

“Drachma,” he muttered, turning to meet Miles’s terrified yet ecstatic gaze. “At last.”

“I’ll go sound the alarm,” Miles said before he let go of his hand and ran for the door.

Their long-awaited war was here.

They met for long hours at a time. They moved pieces on a map and boasted loudly of their plans. Olivier remained silent for the most part, attentive to any and all details that they let on. She knew, by now, that the spring equinox was a marked day on all of their calendars. She knew what the plan was, on both sides of this war. And she knew she would have no chance but to stand and fight it here.

She still hadn’t contacted Briggs to share the news. She didn’t think she should involve them just yet,
not until Mustang’s plan was proven to be solid enough for a flawless execution. He hadn’t asked for
the armies of the north nor mentioned involving any other, he had only spoken of a handful of trusted
allies they could count on to strike the heart of the corrupted Central Command with impeccable
precision.

With time, perhaps, more people would get involved. So far they counted with the kids and their
own allies, and a few soldiers Mustang trusted with their lives. Olivier was relieved to know that
Lieutenant Hawkeye was in on it. She had far more faith in that one woman, from what few rumors
she had heard, than in empty-headed man-child Mustang.

As the generals, gathered today with Father present, boasted of their success and their future one,
Olivier clenched her fists on her lap and thought of how many ways she knew to kill all of these
men. She thought of her own victory over theirs. It was the only thing that made it bearable. She had
no choice but to sit through it, she might as well do so on her own terms.

When the meeting was dismissed, she was the first one to stand up and leave. There was no need to
pretend to like any of it, they all knew what her situation was. She was a hostage made to play by the
kidnapper’s rules.

One of the generals she most despised, an old man with glasses, approached her alongside a sly man,
careful to put his hand directly on the small of her back. She clenched her jaw but said nothing.

“General Armstrong,” he said, smiling even more widely now. She wished for nothing more than the
privacy to rip that smile right off his stupid face and feed it to the turkeys on some rich guy’s gardens.
“Haven’t you heard?”

“I hear a lot of things every day, General Edison,” she said as calmly as she could. “Most of which
lack substance. Will you make my day and share some with me that do not?”

She meant it rhetorically and was more than ready to get rid of his touch and leave, but he held her
arm tight and finally lost the smile as the rest of the generals left the room.

Despite being much shorter than her, Edison had no trouble standing up to whisper right into her ear.

“I wouldn’t be so cocky if I was you,” he said. “You are forgetting your freedom here is minimal.”

“Threaten my freedom again and perhaps I will manage to convince Bradley that your death is as
necessary as Raven’s was,” she hissed to his ear in return, smiling placidly.

Edison scoffed and let her go.

“You won’t act out on your insolence for much longer, Armstrong,” he teased. “Without your fort
and your beloved men—” He grinned like a villain. “—you’re just another insect a man toys with
before crushing it to death.”

Olivier glared at him, walking closer until she towered over him like a menacing storm lurks over the
mountains.

“What of my fort?” she asked.

Edison kept smiling.

“Ah, so you haven’t heard, after all,” he said. “Fort Briggs is at war with Drachma as of today.” He
cackled for a few seconds after that, then walked away from her, only turning at the very last second
before the door closed to add: “Enjoy the—how did you put it?—substance.”
When the door finally closed, she breathed out for a few seconds. Nothing in her showed what was going in within her. None of her limbs shook, her face was a perfect mask of indifference and dislike, and she occupied as much metaphorical space as ever. But she felt the emptiness in the room as an emptiness in her soul, as if some external force had set a vacuum right at the center of her and someone had turned it on until everything had been sucked away from her.

Little by little, even something as puny as the wind managed to erode the mountain away, scattering its ashy remains over the lands where now no shade would fall under the sun.

Even the tallest of mountains would one day end up as nothing but a collection of rocks at the shore of a river, never as mighty again as it once was for everyone who laid eyes on it.

Olivier breathed in again, opened the door, and went straight home. She did not waver for one second as she took the tramway, crowded with people at the end of a long working day, nor as she walked towards her family home.

Not even when her parents greeted her dully, as it was their custom, did she lose her stoic demeanor.

But as soon as she got into her room, as soon as she closed the door behind her, as soon as she allowed herself to fully breathe since she’d left Central Command, Olivier’s inner calm turned into the storm that had been waging for longer than she had been alive.

Her knuckles bled as they punched a hole into her bedroom wall, but she didn’t feel the pain of it. She felt another type of pain, abrasive within her, and had no room in her senses for anything else.

One war and fifteen years, and when the time had finally been right for another war, the war to end future ones, Olivier wasn’t there. She was stuck playing games with masterminds and waiting like a damsel trapped in a tower, captive by a fire-breathing dragon. She was not a damsel, she was a warrior, survivor of a thousand battles and mother to many useless men she had trained to be something better than her.

And she was not with them in the final hour.

Her door creaked, after so many years of not being used, when it was opened.

“I heard something, are you—?” Zinnia’s voice wasted away like a cut piece of thread falling onto the floor. Her eyes had spotted Olivier’s fist stuck on the hole of the wall. “Oh.”

Slowly, Olivier moved her hand away. Zinnia saw the blood on it, but didn’t make a single comment. Her face wrapped around the shape of her mouth in a permanent ‘oh’.

“I—uh—”

“Just ask me already,” Olivier growled. “Ask me and be done with it.”

Zinnia eyed her for a few seconds, trying to measure her reaction. Was she serious about asking? No matter how close they had grown in the past times, Zinnia was well aware that beneath the soft exterior of the Northern Wall of Briggs lay a bear with sharp claws and a terrible temper.

“What… happened?” she asked, after all.

“Drachma.”

“They attacked???” Zinnia asked in a higher-pitched voice than usual.
Olivier just nodded.

“Fuck,” Zinnia just said. “Fuck a thousand times. Just _fuck._”

She looked at Olivier for a few seconds, still unsure as to what to do. She couldn’t just keep standing there like an idiot, she should be getting closer to her, telling her that it was all okay—telling her all the truths Olivier would never believe in her life. Zinnia’s feet remained glued to the floor as she bit her tongue and watched Olivier take a breath after another and turn her back on her.

“Olivier?” Zinnia asked in a low voice that shook slightly. She even lifted her arm, just a little, reaching towards her.

But she dropped it at the sight of Olivier’s back, head bent forward, hair shielding her from Zinnia’s sight. She stood like this, still and terrifying, the light coming in and illuminating just her silhouette, and for a moment Zinnia could almost hear her whimper.

But Olivier didn’t cry.

She had not shed a tear in a long time. Sometimes she thought she was incapable of it. Sometimes she thought all she was good for was standing a ground that wasn’t hers, unsheathing her sword and facing an invisible enemy that could only ever see her as a bear to strike down, never as a woman, never as a human. Olivier couldn’t be sure, but some mornings when she woke beneath the light, she thought that her humanity had been stripped away from her.

It had been left to die among snow and dirt and blood, fifteen years ago. Perhaps even longer ago than that.

She moved slowly at first, towards her desk. It had been left intact since she’d last lived here, organized into pencils and pens and stacks of paper. There was a typewriter too in one corner; she hadn’t remembered she still had it. It was the first thing she saw now, the shadow of her fingertips—younger, more innocent, unaware of what would one day come. Of what would one day separate her from her people.

She wiped the desk clean in one swift swipe. It all fell to the floor in a clutter, in a mess she wouldn’t have tolerated years ago, and it crashed and broke. The keys of the typewriter smashed against the floor, the pencils had their charcoal snapped against the flat surface of it, and the pieces of paper were scattered all over it.

Zinnia gasped loudly enough that it almost snapped Olivier out of it.

Almost.

She moved more quickly, then. She tore off the pictures on the walls, threw the pieces on the bed, on the floor. She flipped the table and it slammed against the wall as if a meteor had fallen on the house. And she didn’t stop until all she had once owned had been rendered useless. She didn’t breathe until she saw it all destroyed.

But when she did, the whole of Central should have been able to hear her.

Olivier didn’t dare turn around. She didn’t dare move. Her breath was hot and heavy in her lungs, and her arms shook from the tension. If she’d had to grasp anything between forefinger and thumb, it would have fallen, too.

“Olivier…” Zinnia whispered wetly. Maybe Olivier should have stopped this for her. Zinnia—poor little Zinnia—knew nothing of what Drachma attacking meant, of what it meant that Olivier wasn’t
up north to fight this the way she’d always longed to. All Zinnia knew was that there was a crazy woman in this room and that she was willingly trapped inside it with her. “Please.”

“Leave,” Olivier muttered barely in an audible tone. She still couldn’t unclench her fists. “Leave me.”

Zinnia stared at her. One minute more, and she knew how this would end. She knew there was nothing to do.

“No,” she said firmly.

Then, Olivier turned around to meet her eye. Whatever usually hid beneath the blue of her eyes had come forth now, dangerous and dark, and it burned on. It whispered: *Fall into my trap, you will never see daylight again.* Olivier’s eyebrows, monsters of their own kind as well, did only support the message, slithering snakes that hissed danger.

“LEAVE. ME.”

The monsters died, the flame burned out, the ice was ice again. Ice that drips once-frozen raindrops onto the tarmac. Ice that knows it’s melting. Ice that Zinnia knew better than she knew herself. Between the creases of her fingertips, that ice ran like water.

Olivier’s lips quivered. Her expression was the pure devastation of deforestation, the last inches of green in a desert that takes up miles and miles of the world. She didn’t look like a woman capable of screams, only mutters.

Zinnia gulped but took the first step she should have minutes ago, avoiding the fallen chunks of room on the floor. She took the next, and it almost didn’t matter, that she had witnessed the last few seconds in real time. Then the next, and the next, until all she had to do to make contact was put her arms around Olivier’s waist and fall into her chest.

“Leave me…” Olivier said weakly.

“Never.”

“Go home.”

“I have no home without you in it.”

“I am no home.”

She was a mountain and she had seen war, she had prepared for it. She had prepared to stand in a battlefield and command her soldiers to win. She had prepared to lead them into victory, and to end what she had begun one day. Staying in the opposite side of the country, playing games and biding her time, angered her, saddened her to this point. To the point of dangerous nihilism.

But if she stopped moving, if she stopped thinking, the same images flooded her mind. Images of the valley’s snow splattered in red, fallen corpses from both sides sprinkling it all, and her men—the men she loved and cherished, the men she cared for—lost to her war. *Her* war, nobody else’s. Not theirs.

In her mind, all she saw was the destruction of everything, even if it was still a victory. Buccaneer’s metal arm was all that remained of him, Miles’s goggles her only memory of her adjutant. And she wouldn’t be there to pick them up, to give them a proper burial.

She *should* be there. It was the only thing she’d ever had to do in fifteen years and a lifetime. The
only thing. And she had failed her own story in order to save someone else’s. The soldier in her knew that to be right, the woman ached to see it changed, to be selfish and to fight for herself.

Neither won.

Zinnia’s arms tightened around her, even if Olivier refused to move still.

“You’re my home,” Zinnia said. “And Briggs is my home. And I believe you will both be fine. You’re made of stronger stuff than anger, Olivier. You’re stronger than your fear.” She slowly put her head under Olivier’s chin. “Briggs will stand. I have no doubt about it. And your men will all be there to welcome you home soon enough.”

Olivier remained quiet for some time. Slowly, her breathing returned to normal. Slowly, she regained use of her hands. She hesitated but finally put them around Zinnia.

Holding on to something, no matter for how long, was bound to give her peace. And peace, no matter how fragile and short-lived, was worth finding.

“Why do you insist on staying by my side? Why haven’t you run?”

Zinnia expected to say that it was because she had nowhere to run to. But the truth was much more different, it had always been.

She lifted her head a little to look Olivier in the eye. Brown and blue, the eternal conversation without words, without sounds.

“I’ve spent my life running,” she said. “From my family, from myself. I thought I’d never settle down, never have a home. Once upon a time, I travelled north. I rented a house in a small town and I made a living. I went to work, I read, I wrote. But it was never a real home to me, just a temporary hideout.” She smiled at the memory of spring, the warmest up north in a while, and of the person she’d been back then. She’d worn dresses, she’d looked up at the sun, she’d enjoyed the pastimes of summer. Nothing like the woman who had emerged from the winter, like the woman who she’d grown into, through hardship into a marble sculpture that broke at nothing. “Then, when the snows fell and I was freezing alone in the cold, this woman walked up to my door, picked me up from the floor, and told me to come with her. At first I didn’t want to stay. I wanted to do what I do best and run. Run so fast I’d never have to face anything again. But, with time, the place that woman offered to have as my shelter became much more than another temporary solution. I shared a room and I shared feelings, and eventually a mattress. And always a life. And this life wasn’t waking up and going to work and feeling like something was always missing. This life was real. I often caught myself thinking back to that place as my home. And that is a privilege no other place has ever had, not since I was little. And…” Zinnia inhaled deeply. “No other person has ever been my family. You don’t run from family.”

Zinnia had the entire world to run to if she wanted to. But it seemed that this was no longer the case.

“I love you, Olivier,” she said. “You’re my family. And you’re my home. And I’m here to weather everything with you, whether you like it or not. I’m here to be what no one else has been to you. I’m here to listen.”

And Zinnia did listen. To what Olivier could tell her, anyway.
The images were still in her mind, and when she woke up at midnight, sweating and panting, it took some time to send them away. But she hadn’t broken anything else. She had fixed the room and she had apologized to Zinnia for the scene, something that Zinnia didn’t get to see every day. And, after all, Olivier had mastered the old art of pretending nothing mattered.

Mustang grabbed her once or twice to speak privately about the plan. Now, at least, they had some ideas, although none of them too bright. If Mustang was behind them, Olivier didn’t really expect any better. The kids were to arrive to Central in a month or so to prepare everything, all they had to do was wait them out.

Olivier waited patiently, nodded to the other side’s plans and discussions about alchemy. She spent hours in the training facilities, making sure she was as fit as ever. And she forced the patience out of her veins as well as she could, strolling around the neighborhood with Zinnia when their respective bored heads couldn’t take it anymore.

For the most part, it was working. She was normal once more, just waiting. Waiting for better plans, waiting for less plans, waiting for the right call that never came.

The images flooded her when she thought about Briggs, so she didn’t. She thought about what she could do right where she was, not where she wasn’t. And she turned a deaf ear to those that came to her with news that were empty and devoid of any real intention to ease her pain.

“How long do wars last?” Zinnia asked her once or twice.

Olivier never had any real answer to give her. Battles lasted days at most. But wars—wars lasted decades, they rotted and they stank and everyone grew tired of them, but they still had to be fought. Until there was no one left.

She fought her own ones quietly. Living the life Zinnia had at Iver. Going to work, distracting herself, and hoping that ‘the best’ would arrive one day.

What a fool she was, to still hope.

One morning after her usual reunion, she was walking to the cafeteria to get something to drink. Even not speaking made her throat dry, and she didn’t want to put up with being uncomfortable for too long, if she could help it. Central itself was a machine meant exclusively for making her uncomfortable, in many more ways than she could have foreseen.

She hoped, as she always did, that she wouldn’t run into Mustang and his unbelievable need to be chivalrous with her. She never even knew if he meant any of it or if it was just a ploy to get her to sneer. Either way, it worked.

It wasn’t Mustang that was waiting for her at the turn of a corner.

It was much, much worse than that.

Her throat closed up entirely when she looked up and her suspicions were confirmed. Blond still, in what little hair he had left, and those piercing blue eyes that still sang the songs of childhood that Olivier remembered.

His face showed the highest of regards, while hers probably looked like it’d been shot at repeatedly.

“How long do wars last?” Zinnia asked her once or twice.
She stared for a few seconds. All she saw was the child she’d played with, the child she’d loved. The man she had never learned to love. The man she hoped she might learn to … one day. For the sake of her family.

“That’s General Armstrong,” she said slowly, “to you.”

He bowed at once.

“Of—of course!”

Their eyes met for the first time in many, many years. Longer than Olivier remembered, longer than she felt in her heart. This was the child that had tugged at her hair and giggled at her when he as nothing but a silly infant. She’d never really be General Armstrong to him, she’d always just be his older sister.

The sister who had shunned him, forgotten him, and never forgiven him. The sister who had been shown the error in those ways. The sister who now stood right in front of him and felt no desire to humiliate him. She had done so far too often long ago.

“Are you well?” she asked him gently.

At first, he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. In a way, she couldn’t either.

_Fifteen years, and the first thing I say to you is what I say to every man on this fort that I don’t want to know. But I know you. I’ve always known you._

A child that instead of running around in the gardens run into her room, showing her his toys. A child that asked her questions and tolerated her dismissals. A child that had loved her. A man that still did.

“Everything is fine, sir,” he said, a glimmer of emotion in his voice. She was proud of him for containing it. “I hope you are … faring well too?”

She nodded.

“Fairly so, yes.”

“I’m glad.”

Her leniency warmed his expression little by little.

“I’m sorry I haven’t seen you at home,” he said. “Things have been extremely busy here.”

She nodded again. “I am well aware.”

“I trust you have found everything to your liking?”

She smiled faintly. Nothing further from the truth. She had found hallows of a past life she’d hoped to forget and been made to live among them.

“Just as I left it,” she said.

“I…” Alex trailed off, looking away from her and scratching the back of his neck.

“Speak up, soldier,” she ordered him.
He cleared his throat.

“I do not know if you have heard,” he began, “but there are news. From the north.”

“What of the north?” she urged him on, seeing as he was having trouble finding the words.

“The men of Briggs have managed to fend the first Drachman attack off.”

Olivier slowly let out a breath she’d been holding.

By now, she had worked it out with Zinnia. Her not being there with those men had been what had led the Drachman to attack. They thought the fort weak without her, like Kimblee had led them to believe (there was only one Crimson Alchemist, and Olivier didn’t think there could be any other informant that matched what she knew of the Drachman plans), and finally Briggs had proved them wrong.

It didn’t mean she had stopped to ache for them, because she wanted to be there with them.

“My men are the strongest of them all,” she said to her brother.

“That is just an old tale, is it not?” Alex, now comfortable for the first time in a long time with his sister, laughed it off.

And Olivier, comfortable for the first time in a long time in company of her brother, opted for the choice of olden days where there had been games and laughter and a shared feeling of loneliness and imperfection.

She slowly, very slowly, stepped on her brother’s left foot while glaring at him. In a way, it was how she said things were okay, finally, between them. After their family had turned them against each other, after a war had separated their hearts.

Alex grimaced.

“Honestly,” he said. “How will you ever find a husband if you continue to behave so childishly?”

Olivier chuckled.

“A husband?” she said. “God, you’re all thick.”

Alex looked at her like he didn’t understand, and she was more than willing to elaborate.

“Haven’t you heard about the girl who came south with me? The one who has taken the guest room opposite to mine?”

“The little one?” Alex said. “The maid?”

Olivier almost smiled again. Zinnia was, above all things, little to the likes of her and her brother, tall as mountains. The rest of their sisters were average-sized for women, their mother was very proud.

“Yes, the little one,” Olivier said, raising an eyebrow.

It took Alex a few seconds to process what she was trying to hint at.

“Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh’,,” she said, then moved her foot away from his. “I see mother has done her job well with
Alex’s face went all somber at the mention of Gwendolyn. Olivier felt a pang of guilt for it. Their mother had been anything but a saint to her, to the child who had disappointed her. But Olivier knew nothing of Alex being treated thus. Perhaps, after Ishval, Gwendolyn had forgotten he was her golden boy and had started to see the similarities he shared with the black sheep of the family.

Olivier wished she was wrong. But her brother’s face said something different. It conveyed the same pain Olivier had endured hiding in a closet while living in a mansion.

“Yes,” he muttered, “she has.”

The fort was a barricade, even though there was nothing but dead bodies in the valley around them, nothing they needed defense against. The gates had been closed for days, and now all patrols ever did was sit up on the top of the wall, faces covered against the icy wind, watching for more Drachman legions.

The men Central had sent had only ever seen the silhouettes of Drachma nearing them and had ran away like the cowards they were, losing themselves in the comforts of a train and eventually their own city. Briggs had welcomed it, as it could be no other way.

Now, Buccaneer and Miles were in charge. They sat in Olivier’s office and organized the men around. Sometimes, if they were busy enough with rations and ammunition and patrols, they almost didn’t miss her growling and her ordering about. It was hard to say they did not miss her, they did. This was her home, her hearth, her rightful place. They were getting it dirty, even if they were keeping it alive.

“Cut Austin off the night patrol,” Buccaneer said, breaking the silence.

They had been working quietly since dinner, both sitting at the end of the desk where Olivier had used to sit, each on his own until it was time to correct something the other was doing. Miles, usually, was the one to speak the most.

Even at his most tired, even at the end of the world, he had eyes like no one else; they saw flaws to fix and he knew how to fix them. Spotless attention to detail and spotless skill to perfect those details.

“Why?” Miles asked.

“He’s overworked.”

“We all are, Buccaneer,” Miles said, looking back down at the list of patrols he was doing. “We all need to soldier on as best we can.”

Buccaneer grumbled under his breath.

“You don’t agree, clearly,” Miles commented a few seconds after.

“If I agreed, I wouldn’t have told you,” Buccaneer said. “He’s young, he’s still inexperienced, he’s not used to this. And he’s been soldiering on like a champ these past few days. A bit of rest hurts no one, there’s plenty of us out there with enough energy to keep going in his place.”

Miles looked up into his black eyes. There really was no doubt that Buccaneer had as big a heart as...
Briggs. In all the years Miles had known him, he had always thought it something that would eventually wear him down. The north was cold, unforgiving. It was improper of a man who had been living there for so long to care so deeply, to sacrifice so much. And yet here he was, offering himself so a younger man would rest.

Miles had been in his company for a few long years, he had seen Buccaneer operate. For a man so old, he was twice as stubborn as anyone else. If he said Austin was to be allowed some time off, then who was Miles to refuse Buccaneer that? If he only asked that, how could he not give it?

Gently, Miles scratched Austin’s name off the list and watched Buccaneer smile. It lit up his already worn enough face, and it reminded Miles that the fight was not lost as long as Buccaneer remained at his side, with that grin of his that could turn armies around.

Buccaneer frowned when Miles didn’t add his name in Austin’s place.

“What are you doing?” he grumbled.

Miles chuckled softly.

“You should get some rest,” he said. “There will be plenty of other opportunities to watch the sun rise on your watch.”

Buccaneer’s frown deepened.

“You won’t dare add yours, I hope?”

Miles smiled at him.

“No,” he said. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

He couldn’t. He had watched—for what seemed like an eternity—Olivier send him on missions, award him the hardest tasks, trust him openly and publicly about the most secretive of informations while Buccaneer stood in a corner, his face the saddest thing Miles had ever seen. All those years, he would have been blind not to see that Buccaneer just wanted to be one more, not Olivier’s must-protect project.

“Thank you, Miles,” Buccaneer said, and Miles knew he was being honest. “You know, I think Thompson’s had a few free nights as of late. It wouldn’t kill him to be up for one.”

Miles laughed again. This was odd, even for him, but he paid that no mind. It was late and he was tired, and Buccaneer was being strangely less abrasive and loud under the light of the candles. There was nothing more to it.

“As long as you get to sleep,” Miles said, never more serious, “then I am satisfied.”

“As long as we get to sleep,” Buccaneer corrected. After all, that was what he was there for.

To aid Miles, to support Miles, to be with Miles. They were bound to be a duo, those two, and Buccaneer knew it as well as he knew his own name. They were Olivier’s care system, both emitters and receivers of it, and in existing there they had learned to care for one another as well. When she was on a mood and she turned against them, they had each other to pass the time and to share whatever punishment she threatened them with. They had been together by her side during the best and the worst of Briggs.

Buccaneer belonged at Miles’s side. He didn’t dare hesitate about the truth of that statement.
And Miles… by the way he was looking at him, Buccaneer supposed it was rather mutual. Always.

A shrill sound broke the silence. And it took a few seconds of mild panic in their eyes to realize it was the phone, ringing.

It was Miles who picked it up, always Olivier’s right-hand man, always the leader where Buccaneer was merely a buffoon with armor on.

“Fort Briggs?” the voice at the other line said.

“Yes.”

“I’m calling from Dublith on behalf of Alphonse Elric.”

Miles shot a quick look at Buccaneer as if he meant to ask if he too remembered that as being the name of one of the two boys who Olivier had kept prisoner.

“My name is Izumi Curtis,” the voice said. “And I’ve been tasked to inform you of the plans the Central bastards have for the country.”

“Why?” Miles was only ever able to ask.

“Because we’re going to need all the help we can get,” Izumi said. “And my kid here trusts you with this information.”

Miles took a deep breath.

“I’m all ears.”

“I hope you’re sitting down…”

As soon as Izumi hung up, long minutes later, Miles explained it all to Buccaneer, who had been trying to listen to everything. There would be no sleeping tonight, not after knowing all of this. If they wanted to do anything, they would have to begin doing it now.

Tanks would have to be built, ammunition hauled, and the war would have to be won by far sooner than later. Central awaited.

“The general won’t allow it,” Buccaneer said after Miles had caught him up. His face was whiter than usual, and he was biting his lip. The weight of knowledge burned his core. “She wanted to do this alone.”

“I’m afraid—” Miles said slowly. “—that this time we have no choice. If what this woman said it’s true, Olivier is going to need the full strength of Fort Briggs.”

“General Armstrong?”

Olivier quit staring at her brother, trying to figure out what had gotten into him, and found the petite figure of one of the errand boys.

She cleared her throat.
“Yes?”

“You’re expected back in the room. There’s someone waiting for you.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

The boy left. And Alex was still looking like a puppy had been shot before his very eyes.

“You’re required elsewhere,” he said before she had to.

“Sad about it, little brother?”

Alex seemed to visibly cheer up when she called him that. His face returned once again to the face she remembered, full of light and love.

“Quite,” he said, laughing heartily. “I will see you at home, then—” And he waited a few seconds before he added, looking away, blushing: “—sister.”

As a goodbye, she patted him on the parts of his back that she could reach. In her considerable height, Alex had still surpassed her. It was bound to happen in families like hers, and she had only been the firstborn.

Trying not to think about it too much, she made it back to the meeting room. One of the generals was waiting for her outside of it, his expression serene and expectant.

She approached him at once.

“Armstrong,” he only said. “Come with me, you’re ready.”

Ready for what? She wondered. Was it finally time to be spoken to like one of them, to be trusted with state secrets? Would she be able to make this information known to Mustang and his people at last?

“Are you familiar with the three main rules of alchemy, general?” he asked her all of a sudden.

“Of course. Obey the military, do not create gold, do not create people.” She paused for a moment. He had said three, had he not? “And that’s it.”

She breathed easy, knowing that she had gotten it right. God only knew why she still remembered that. It must have stuck around in her mind from those days in which all Alex did was recite his knowledge around the house like a little talking book.

She smiled now at the memory.

“I’m sure you’re well aware why those rules exist,” the general said conversationally.

“Obeying the military is a given,” she said. “Creating gold would greatly destabilize the economy. And creating people is one of the few taboos there are even among alchemists, if I’m not mistaken.”

He only nodded approvingly.

She and the general had descended a few floors onto the very basement of the building, untouched by human hand for many years if the cobwebs were any indication. Even there, she did not ask where she was being taken. If this was any sort of trap, she’d fight her way through it. Even ten men were no threat to her if she had her sword.
And Bradley wasn’t so stupid as to kill her off. Not when her leadership position in Briggs was still fresh in the minds of the soldiers there. If the news of her death travelled north, he must have known his city would be invaded by three hundred men thirsty for blood.

No one dared play with the men from Briggs. Just with the last woman standing among them, apparently.

At the turn of a long and wet corridor, a door waited before them, wooden and stained, and probably thick enough that it would take a while to bring down with her shoulder if she had to. She couldn’t help but think that maybe this was where Central kept all of its secrets, piled up like treasure under a dragon’s paws.

“Step back,” he warned her. “And be quiet.”

With a push, the door opened to a dimly lit room that, judging by the echo of their voice, seemed to be quite large.

“You know your theory well, General Armstrong,” he told her. “Better than most, actually. But the creation of people isn’t banned for the reasons that you may think. The only reason behind that is so that nobody thinks of creating—”

Decidedly, the general pushed a button and there was light in the room. Her estimations had been right, it was large.

And it was crowded with—with…

“—an army.”

An army of anthropomorphic figures hanging from wires, apparently dormant or maybe even dead. The only thing she would have bet money on was that they seemed to be waiting.

For the right order.

The last puzzle of this military plan was—

“An immortal legion. Created from nothing to follow our commands forever. When the moment comes, as you know it will, this army will defend headquarters.” He made sure to look into her eyes now. Whatever he saw, whatever facet of her being that nobody else had ever seen, he kept to himself. “I’m sure you understand the meaning of this.”

It meant they were doomed. If this was to keep watch over Central Command, no mortal man could hope to come out on top during a fight.

It meant that the Führer knew she might be in contact with someone. And it meant that she was expected to pass this information along. It didn’t matter to them, she knew, because even if their enemy was up to date, they would still never dispose of enough time to prepare to face an immortal army.

It meant that Olivier’s plans had to change. And they had to change now. The Promised Day, when the alchemy of the country would finally serve its dark purposes, was less than two months away.

And now Olivier harbored no hope of making it out alive.

She and Mustang’s men, they could strive to be an obstacle for Central, in many more ways than they currently had thought of. But they would never outlive a being that couldn’t die.

She maintained her composure, though. Whatever reaction these people had been hoping to get out
of her, she wasn’t going to give it to them.

“They’re not alive now, are they?” Olivier asked, her voice lower than usual.

“They’re nothing but dummies, general.” He walked closer to one of the humanoid creatures, put a hand to its white forehead. She refrained from taking a step back. “Powerful dummies we can bond souls to.”

“And where do you plan on procuring these souls?”

She had already guessed the answer to that question. Everything Central had done since the inception of the country had been done at the cost of the country itself.

Amestris was a sinking boat.

“From rival lands, of course,” the general answered. “Citizens from the countries we ravage during the course of war. For one reason or another, the battlefield serves as a hunting ground for the collection of souls.”

Olivier just nodded. She didn’t need to add anything to this, it was clear enough. They had decided to show her at last, to show her how resistance was futile.

“Is this all?” she just asked.

The general didn’t seem to understand.

“Is this all I was required for?” she asked again.

“Yes,” he said, “but—”

She left without another word the same way she’d come.

The Promised Day was now. She had to act when she still could, when the roads weren’t on fire and people advised to stay indoors for the duration of everything. Even now, a world away from her true home and family, she still had people to protect.

_I swore an oath to._

Olivier had come home with her brother, and Zinnia had stared at them for a full five minutes at dinner, eyes open wide in surprise and awe. This was not the scenario she had imagined when picturing a reunion of those two. But she had to admit she wasn’t going to complain about something she had often wished.

Alex seemed like a nice man, open and enthusiastic. Just nice. He kissed Zinnia’s hand even when she insisted that he didn’t have to. It was fun, after, when they were seated, to expertly communicate to Olivier via eye contact that perhaps she could do that more often.

For the most part, she didn’t think she’d succeeded. But this was not something she could easily bring up with her parents and brother sitting in the same table as they were. They had even sat at opposite ends of it, Zinnia being right next to Alex and Catherine, and Olivier sat with her parents.

Immediately after the maid had taken away their plates and they had all stood up, dinner concluded, Zinnia had mentioned it, rubbing a dangerous hand on Olivier’s arm on their way upstairs for the
“You didn’t return any of my luscious looks,” Zinnia said.

“I’m going to fight my brother for the family inheritance.”

*It’s the only way,* Olivier thought to herself. The only way they will think this is their idea. The only way they will be safe.

Zinnia blinked a few times, waiting for Olivier say *something else* that made more sense than that random string of words. She had heard right, of course she had: Olivier had said she was going to fight her brother. And Zinnia took ‘fight’ to mean combat quite literally, knowing the Armstrong siblings.

“What???”

“Fight my brother for the family inheritance,” Olivier repeated slowly.

Zinnia stared at her for a full minute, trying to discern what the hell was going on.

“You’re nuts. You’re completely nuts,” she concluded.

“I’m not discussing my sanity with you.”

“Eat ass,” Zinnia said with a straight face. “Why the fuck would you throw down with him?”

Olivier shushed her. Even if she knew she wasn’t being monitored, she couldn’t help but try and be cautious anyway. This decision, like every other one she had made since the year had started, could be the catalyst of something much, much bigger.

“To keep them safe…” she answered, her voice barely audible as she took the final steps to the first floor.

Zinnia had to run to catch up. It seemed to her that even if Olivier had brought this up, she was regretting it now.

“You’re gonna kick his ass to keep him safe? How’s that for logical?”

“It would be, if you had all the information.”

“Which you refuse to share.”

“I have my reasons.”

Olivier closed the door of the room once Zinnia was in and grabbed her hand, pulling her close to look her in the eye.

“The less people know what’s going on, the less I have to worry about.”

“And what is going on?”

“Don’t try this on me.”

“It works.”

“Just don’t.”
Zinnia stared at her.

“It’s bad, isn’t it? Worse than you thought?”

Olivier just nodded. She didn’t want to let anything on, but she supposed she had to. Not enough, never enough for Zinnia to know. The less she knew, the less Olivier would worry.

*And the more danger she’ll be in,* she told herself.

Information allowed for change of plans, for movement. In not telling her, Olivier was caging Zinnia somewhere that, at least, she thought safe. But would it be for long enough?

Zinnia seemed to misunderstand her silence. She approached her slowly again.

“They’re going to think you’re mad, Olivier,” she said softly.

“That’s the price I’ve always paid to protect them. I know full well what the consequences are. If I go down, fine. But I’m not bringing my family down with me.”

Go… down? It had come to that? The plans Central hid behind had come to be something that might endanger their lives beyond the levels Zinnia had imagined.

She swallowed hard. She didn’t know what Central had in store for them, she could only guess, but she had one thing clear even now:

“Well, sorry for disrupting your glorious sacrificial plans, but you’re not going down alone.”

And such a statement shocked them both. Zinnia had spent her life running from herself, and Olivier had only been brave enough to run once. Except that now, Zinnia chose to stay, because at long last she had a place in life where she didn’t feel isolated, and Olivier had left all she knew and loved to save people.

She had left *almost* all her loved ones. Almost.

One had come all this way with her, one had just declared she feared death as little as she feared the winter.

Olivier lifted a hand and cupped it around Zinnia’s face. Still so very small, still a safe haven, even if the world went to shit around them. It had already been like that once, it seemed it could continue to be.

*Good,* she thought.

“You should’ve stayed in the north, flower girl,” she said instead, far sadder than Zinnia would ever know. Zinnia may have been ready to die for her, but was Olivier ready to let her? Should she? No matter if this was her choice, if Olivier had a shot at saving her, wouldn’t she risk it all? Even if it meant betraying her.

Zinnia’s betrayed and broken heart was something Olivier would be able to live with, as long as that heart was alive.

“And you shouldn’t have come down south,” Zinnia said, smiling sadly as well. “Now I’ll have to die here with you.”

*Now I’ll have to prepare for our deaths,* she thought.
It felt strange, for she wasn’t afraid.

And she should have been.

Chapter End Notes

It has been a week and I have missed this fic dearly <3

For those of you who might have noticed, Lust and Gluttony are indeed supposed to be dead by now, so it doesn't make much sense for Olivier to have seen them, but the quote didn't feel quite as potent without all of the Homunculi names in it XD
The bed wobbled every time that Olivier moved on it, and that happened quite a few times per night. She tried sleeping on one side, and after a while, when her own thoughts made her weary, she would try the other one, seeking better luck in the view of a bare neck before her. Zinnia, now that she had a chance to share a bigger bed with her, had made it possible for Olivier to discover her true sleeping positions, all varied and sprawled, head always a little forward, enough that Olivier could see Zinnia’s neck, the last strands of her hair falling onto the pillow.

Sometimes that was all Olivier needed to fall asleep, but tonight she stared at it, trying to commit it to memory, and the previous conversation she’d had with Zinnia bombarded her brain. She should not have shared any of it with Zinnia, she should have stuck to her original plan of leaving official information out, but … the more time she spent with this flower from the south the less she could bite her tongue around her. It was a dangerous spell the magic of life had cast on her, and Olivier had no way around it. She might as well let it guide her.

“Are you asleep?” she asked the bare neck. The space was different around them now that they almost had an entire floor to themselves, as if the silence had grown heavier.

Zinnia made a little groaning noise when Olivier shook her shoulder.

“Almost, now.”

She turned on the bed. Olivier did not miss the sight of her neck now that she had those pools of infinite sass and innocence staring right at her like Olivier hadn’t just woken her up in the middle of the night.

“Why are you not asleep?” Zinnia asked, rubbing one eye with her knuckles.

“I’m thinking about what I told you earlier.”

“You didn’t really tell me much. You just hinted at it.”

Olivier rolled her eyes at her in the darkness. It was, like many of her facial expressions, not really meant to be seen.

“Well, you understood me, didn’t you?”

Zinnia nodded innocently.

“I need them all out of here before March,” Olivier said. “Even if the entire country is involved, we know it’s going to hit hardest here in Central.” She sighed. “And if you won’t go—” Olivier shot her pointed look. Zinnia pretended she didn’t know why that was for her.

“—I’m not going—”

Olivier had already known that, so she continued, speaking over Zinnia’s firm whisper.

“—at least I have to make sure my parents and my brother are safe by then.”

Safe was, once again, too big a word for her. Nowhere was safe, if the north wasn’t. And this time
the north, even if it was the last to fall, had been a target longer than any other place. She would have to think where to send her family, where to keep them away from all of this. Because she doubted any of them could ever truly be safe again.

“And the plan is to fight your brother for the inheritance?”

Zinnia huddled closer, laying her head on her folded hands.

Olivier nodded.

“I suppose there’s some logic in that to you.”

“Alex is their most reliable son, so it’s been his by right for years. But I’m the eldest, it should go to me. They know this. If I tell them I want to earn that right back, my father is traditional, he will have us fight for it. And I will win.”

Zinnia doubted for a moment. Alex Armstrong was over seven feet tall and wide as an armoire. She had seen the pictures Olivier’s mum kept around the house, pictures of him as a boy and then growing into the man he was now. Apparently, he had kept growing well into his twenties, and when he had stopped getting taller, he’d begun getting wider. He truly was a sight to behold, the pride of the family if there was really any pride left to feel in the world.

“Have you seen your brother?” Zinnia pointed out. “He’s a building, he could crush you.”

Olivier glared at her and subtly got both arms out from under the covers, flexing subconsciously.

“I’m stronger than I look.”

Zinnia didn’t dare question that, they had sparred enough times in the past for her to know that Olivier knew how to hold back better than she knew how to use her full strength.

“Even if you win, he won’t just go, will he? He works for Central now.”

That, he did. And Olivier would have to do her best to get him out anyway. He couldn’t stay. No matter what had happened between them in the past, she wasn’t going to let anyone harm the Armstrongs. She liked to think it was a matter of principle, of keeping the bloodline safe, but … really, anyone who had looked into her eyes for longer than five seconds would have known why she did it. Thankfully, no one dared question it to her face.

“I’ll drag him out of the country if I have to do it myself.”

“And your parents? You’re just… going to push them out? Has that ever worked?”

“It will be my house when I win. My mother will not want to stay at my house. And my father will do as she says.” Olivier snorted. Philip had always done everything in the best interest of his wife, the brain behind all that happened under their roof. She had raised the children as she had pleased, and she had judged the children accordingly. All Olivier’s father had done was nod and smile, a puppet if she’d ever seen one. It wouldn’t take much, thankfully, to get her mother to want out of there. And soon her father would follow without a complaint. “Obviously.”

After a while, she caught Zinnia staring with her big eyes, like she planned to swallow the whole world like that. It would fit in them, Olivier had no doubt about that. *Eyes like those, you hardly ever see. But they always see you, even when you don’t notice it.*

Olivier knew that Zinnia wasn’t up to date with anything. She always was just given bits and pieces,
and yet the woman managed to form a better bigger picture than Olivier could with the same
information. Zinnia understood, she took everything she knew deep into her heart and felt her way
around it. She stepped into Olivier’s shoes, and she did it so well sometimes Olivier suffered for
whatever Zinnia might find out in that position. Olivier’s shoes had never properly fit. She had long
ago learned they might never do.

“They will hate you,” Zinnia muttered.

Olivier quirked an eyebrow.

“More?”

Zinnia had noticed, of course, the trail of silence that followed when she and Olivier walked into the
living room when her parents were still in. Zinnia was invisible around them, just another servant,
but Olivier they should have seen. She was their eldest, and she hadn’t been home in fifteen years.
She had left as a child and come back as a woman, and neither hosted the most minimal bout of
curiosity as to know who their daughter had become in those years of separation. The only
conclusion Zinnia had come to was that they simply did not care, they were too absorbed in their tiny
lives as to notice important things anymore. Perhaps that was why Olivier wanted them out before it
was time, because they wouldn’t know not to endanger themselves if she didn’t suggest it to them
first.

Although maybe winning a house and an inheritance to do that wasn’t the best way to succeed. It
was very Olivier, truth be told, but that didn’t mean it was effective.

“I’m just saying, it’s a bad plan. Just tell them the truth.”

“They won’t know what to do with it, they’re small-minded people who would trust anyone in their
same social status as long as they looked like they belonged in it. They will trust the Führer for as
long as they live.”

In the end, that was the danger her family faced. Their own blind trust in their world being safe.

“You know them well even after having spent fifteen years apart.” Zinnia commented.

Olivier smiled. “Some people don’t really ever change.”

“Sometimes I wish that weren’t true…” Zinnia sighed.

Her situation wasn’t much different. She, too, had a father who put too much trust in the world he
knew, not the world he could see hiding beneath the surface. He, too, had a wife to follow. A wife
that Zinnia had always felt a bit insecure around. More than a bit.

And yet… now they were back in the same province, all of them. Olivier’s family, Zinnia’s family.
So different and yet so alike. But was Zinnia like Olivier? Did she have her situation at home clear
enough to act on it during times like this?

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to picture her hometown again, now a little bit grayer in the
winter, and her—once—people walking around, carrying sacks of rice and wheat and leading cows
to their deaths. Her home, once upon a time, now a memory she had to decide to visit to remember.

Her father was there, her mother was there, her old friends. They, too, would inevitably meet the
ends Central had set for them without asking. Zinnia had come south knowing she would eventually
have to do something about that more than just watching Olivier have her death wish.
“Well,” she said, taking in some air, “in that case, I think I’ll take a page out of your book.”

Olivier opened her own eyes to look at her. She had supposed Zinnia had just given up on talking and had fallen asleep mid-conversation.

“Not going to follow your steps a hundred percent—I’d probably call myself crazy if I did—but… I have family I don’t want to see involved in this, too. No matter how long it’s been. And if you’re getting ready for the worst, I should as well, right? I mean, it’s only logical.”

Zinnia’s words could only mean one thing to Olivier.

She sighed before she said, reluctant to fully believe it:

“You will tell them the truth, won’t you?”

Zinnia nodded.

“I don’t like lying to the people I love.”

Olivier tried not to feel guilty about that.

Olivier and Philip were sitting on the living room when Zinnia got her—and Olivier’s—suitcase out of the house, where a car was waiting for her to take her to her hometown. Olivier hadn’t wanted her to go by train when her family had enough money to rent every single car in town for months and a driver of their own. Olivier had come down, for appearances sake, to see her off without her parents suspecting anything, and had sat down with her father. It was the strangest of feelings to be there after days of sticking to her room when she was in the house, like she was trespassing somehow. She hoped her father didn’t attribute the tension in her to that.

“Who was that, dear?” he asked once the engines were on and the car drove away.

“My adjutant.”

“Does she have leave to abandon you?”

“She’s not abandoning me. She just has days off and is going to spend them somewhere nice.” Like normal people. Not that she knew what that was anymore.

“It’s been a while since your mother and I had days off.”

Since neither of them had worked in years, Olivier allowed herself a silent moment of criticism.

“I never understood why you would stay here when there is so much world out there to see,” she said.

Her father sipped tea with his pinky finger up.

“I suppose … having children just puts a damper on things,” he said, patting her thigh with a grin as if she hadn’t been the first of those ‘children’.

You have had a maid since before you got married, she thought. This was no place to discuss her parents’ wealth. She thought of it as theirs, rather than hers too. She had always refused its privileges. Even now that she was back, she didn’t feel like she had a right to use any of it for her own
purposes.

“Your mother often wonders when we will have grandchildren to spoil,” he said casually.

“Soon, I imagine,” Olivier said with her best calm voice. “Didn’t Amue and Strongine find husbands?”

“Oh, dear…” Her father giggled. “You really won’t settle down, will you?”

She allowed herself to smile. She could see it, after so many years, that same aura around her father, not exactly of innocence but perhaps of naiveté. She knew he didn’t mean any harm by it. And she had long ago learned to forgive him for it.

“I’m afraid not, no.”

_Not the way you want me to_. It amounted to the same thing, anyway.

He patted her thigh again.

“Will you come with us, if we go anywhere nice as your friend has?”

She stared at him, unable to believe her ears.

“It has just been terribly long, you know,” he said with a sigh. “We could go anywhere you’d like.”

Olivier smiled to herself. Her father had never really changed the way he looked at her, like a child he felt bound to delight in every way he could, despite what his wife did when he wasn’t around. Now, when she had long ago ceased to be that child he’d thought would inherit after he died, her father was offering her the opportunity to come with them on vacation. _For the sake of old times long gone_, she thought. _Old times that never really came to pass_. He was offering her a childhood, and she had to turn it down politely, because she was a woman now, a woman who had sworn oaths and had to act accordingly.

“You and mother go,” she said after a few seconds. “I have important work here in Central.”

He looked at her with sad eyes, for a moment letting the image of youth that his words projected fall and crush.

“Sometimes I forget who you are, Olivier,” he said. “A general, no less.”

“Major general,” she corrected him softly.

“You have made it farther than I ever did,” he continued. “And yet to me you are still that little girl who wanted to learn how to use a sword.”

He smiled fondly at the memory of that, of a five-year-old who wished to get dirtied up in the mud in the gardens and was only ever made to stay inside playing with dolls. Giving her a sword had granted her wish, but also had taught her the discipline her mother wished to instill her in order to prepare her for the life of a lady.

“Oh well,” he said now, “how fast time flies!” He looked at her. “So, my dear, where shall your mother and I go? You have seen more of the world than we have, what do you recommend?”

Olivier paused for a moment. All that her eyes had seen remained in Amestris, but her mind had travelled the continents. Her mind had crossed the desert east of the country into new lands.
It had been years ago, and yet Olivier still remembered. She thought about it for a moment; it would have to do, it would just have to be far enough.

“I hear Xing is lovely this time of the year,” she said. “The trees must be about to bloom.”

March was almost upon them, spring would soon come.

She wasn’t the same woman who had travelled here only last spring. It wasn’t that the landscape had changed, or that the people were any different than they’d been. Whatever alternations had been done, had been done to her—inside her. Getting out of the Armstrong’s family car into the open space didn’t grant her a wave of homeliness. This … wasn’t home.

Home had been left behind under snow and wind and foreign rule.

This was just a place to remember her childhood, her mistakes, and her one success. Like opening a photo album to go through old moments in time, safely, from the comfort of your own couch.

Her being here had everything to do with preserving that album, keeping it away from anything that may hurt it, even if it was just a little bit.

Olivier may have her brutal ways of dealing with it, but Zinnia wasn’t going to let anything even come close to her memories and to the people who had made them possible. Good or bad, little did it matter. If she had the power to keep destruction from meeting her hometown in battle, she wouldn’t sit back and be picky as to who deserved to escape it. It shouldn’t work like that.

She turned to see the car drive back to the city, its wheels crushing the gravel. That was the sound of returning. Today it was the sound of anticipation.

All Zinnia had failed to do during her months of imprisonment in Briggs was coming back to her, all she had left behind for her future self to deal with when spring came and she was allowed back on Iver. She had stopped sending money, she had stopped writing, she had stopped caring.

You were trapped inside a military fort for months, worried enough as it was about surviving, she reminded herself. Although she was well aware that she could have asked Olivier, at some point after they’d stopped dancing around each other like moths around a flame, and sent her family some money every week. She was sure it would have worked out, Olivier looked at her like she was ready to set the world ablaze just to see her smile.

No, Zinnia was to blame for having been too caught up in her own survival—at first—and then in a love story in the making.

That didn’t make the churning in her stomach easier to digest as she walked the streets and watched the people in them, coming and going, selling and buying. Small town life met her again, after so long. And she couldn’t say she didn’t miss it. But it reminded her of the north, not of younger years.

When she finally arrived at the door of her parents’ house, she didn’t hesitate, she just pushed it open. Younger her had worried enough. Present her just wanted to get it over with, do the right thing quickly so she could return to the heart of it all, so she could try and fix it there too.

“Excuse me, this is a private lodging,” said a voice behind her.

Zinnia tried to turn around inconspicuously to face a blond man with the most amusing of puzzled
expressions on his face.

“Miss Erwin?” he said at once.

Ah, this must be the man she had hired—almost a lifetime ago—to take care of her parents in her absence.

“Yes?” she replied meekly.

“I didn’t know it was you, forgive me.”

“No need to worry…” she drifted off, unable to remember what his name was. And she wasn’t just about to go ask him, was she? She hadn’t hired him that long ago, though, she should have still retained the memory of talking to him about working for her family. “It’s been a long time.”

“Certainly,” he said, nodding.

“Everything, uh, okay around here?” she asked. If her parents had been having trouble with their money, she couldn’t understand how the hell they were still paying this guy to help around the house. And it would just be very weird if he was still here when he wasn’t getting paid.

“Everything is as you left it.”

She smiled, dismissing the conversation, and went straight to the living room. Smaller than she remembered it, used to Briggs’ kitchens and the Armstrongs’ humongous house, but still the same place where she had learned how to read the starry skies and find her way in a storm.

He who had taught her was sitting there, in the same place he had taken in her memories, reading over a book with a pair of well-worn glasses low on his nose.

“Dad,” she said, her grin just as big as Briggs itself.

Her dad looked up from the book slowly, but as soon as he met her eye he smiled as well. It was the smile she’d loved best from her childhood, teller of stories and savior of Zinnia’s youngest self in tales and real life alike.

“My little Zin, my little flower.”

“Hi,” she said, coming to sit by his side.

He didn’t take more than half a second to kiss her cheek and hold her hand in his.

“How come you’re back?” he said, his eyes full of questions and eager for answers.

“My… girlfriend had to come south to take care of urgent business, and I thought I might as well come down with her.”

“Girlfriend, you say…”

She bit her lip but nodded and didn’t dare look away.

“Who is she? The lovely lady you mentioned in your letters?”

Zinnia nodded again, feeling the blush all over her face.

“The general in Fort Briggs, yup.”
“A general!” her father squealed.

“A general,” she squealed back. “Honestly, I can’t believe it. It almost didn’t happen, you know? I almost let it pass me by.”

“You were always a little dense with your love affairs.” He giggled.

“I’m not dense.”

“Is she as impressive as they say?”

Zinnia grinned. “She’s so much more than they say, to be honest.”

“And what is that urgent business she has here? How is it that they have managed to bring the Northern Wall of Briggs so far south?”

“I’ll tell you when mum’s back.”

“She might still be a while…” he said, clearly meaning that she could tell him now.

“It’s… something she needs to hear, too. I’d really rather tell you both.”

Her father feigned to be offended.

“And here I was hoping for some gossip.”

“Don’t even say that word to me…” she said, laughing. “Up north everything circles around gossip. It’s exhausting.”

Her father looked at her curiously.

“I imagine it to be so, if you’re a general’s petite amie…”

“Enough about me!” Zinnia said, beginning to blush again. She hadn’t forgotten about Buccaneer’s intent on getting her and Olivier together. He had been so obsessed with it that in the end he had made it possible. Olivier still spoke adamantly about Buccaneer and Miles convincing her to run after Zinnia when she’d almost left. That felt like it had happened a long, long time ago. “How is your knee?”

It took a judging look from Zinnia for her father to put down his leg, already midway up in the air.

“No longer stiff, I see,” she laughed.

“I have you to thank for that.” He tipped her chin.

“You do, actually.”

“Everything has been better since.”

Zinnia looked at him, unsure if it was a jest or if he meant it. With all it had taken to have him undergo his surgery, she did well in wondering. “I’m glad.”

“But we missed getting your monthly—”

The door opened, revealing a ginger man and a smaller woman with her graying her in a bun who was carrying a basket with food.
“We’re back, Mr. Erwin,” said the ginger man.

“Anthony?” Zinnia gasped when he came into the light of the house.

“Zinnia?” her mother almost yelled.

“Glad to see we all remember everyone’s names…” Zinnia’s dad laughed.

His wife glared at him like one could only do after many years of marriage.

“You old fool…” She held Zinnia’s gaze instead of his, as if her daughter was the reason her husband was saying nonsense and had this ridiculous look on his face. “And you… How dare you? How dare you show up like this?”

“Last I heard it wasn’t a crime, is it?” Zinnia said without ruffling her hair.

Her mother dropped the basket she was carrying onto the table and leaned towards Zinnia, her eyebrows looking very cross.

“You abandoned us, you don’t get to come back.”

“Leave the poor girl alone,” her dad said. “She was trapped inside a military fort.”

Mrs. Erwin glared as if her whole life depended on it.

“They have phones in military forts, they have messenger systems.”

“They also don’t pay money for doing their chores unless you’re a soldier…” Zinnia mumbled under her breath.

She really couldn’t have imagined a different coming-back-home moment. Her father wanted to know everything about her life, and all her mother wanted was Zinnia out of the house, back into the unknown. And, of course, Anthony should well be in the middle of it, staring like he had all the necessary knowledge in the world to not intervene. Not that Zinnia wanted him to.

“Watch your tone.”

“I had no way to send money,” Zinnia said slowly. “I had no way to reach you.”

“You could have called!” her mother said, and Zinnia knew she was right. She had always known she would regret not having gotten in touch after winter had hit the north prematurely.

“Would you have done anything except scream at me if I had?” she said anyway. Because she could hear her mother’s screams in an alternate reality where that had happened. It would have been so embarrassing to have that conversation in front of frowning Olivier, back when they still hadn’t been anything but idiots.

“You would have deserved it!”

“I may have!” Zinnia screamed back. “But I didn’t call. And that’s done. Now, I would like to know how the hell you’ve managed to scrape off without me.”

There followed a tense silence of exchanged glances. Finally, Anthony, who was standing still near the door, spoke the truth to them all, although she was the only one that didn’t know it.

“I couldn’t let them go through any trouble,” he said gently. “You wouldn’t have wanted them to.”
Zinnia slammed her face on the table.

“Wonderful…” she muttered. “Just wonderful.” Then she lifted her head again to take the measure of Anthony, who was managing to look even more like a soft nonthreatening boy than ever. “I guess I should thank you, then.”

“You should,” her mother said. “He’s the reason the butchery’s still running.”

Zinnia ignored her and continued to stare at Anthony, hoping he would be made uncomfortable by it. As always, though, he had an amazing resilience to her wrath. Not that this could be called such. This was just rebound feelings from a long time ago, as everything that involved Anthony was.

“Should I also thank you for leaving me to die in the bitter cold?” she said.

“I’m sorry—”

“I don’t give a shit about ‘sorry’,” she said. “If it hadn’t been because someone else took piety on me, I would have frozen to death waiting for your help.” She snorted and looked at her mother out of the corner of her eye. “I suppose you still would have found a way to make me guilty for that.”

“Zinnia…” Anthony began. “I’m sorry. I told you I did my best, I just—no one had the means to reach you.”

“It goes both ways,” she spat at them. “If you couldn’t reach me, then I couldn’t reach you either.”

“It was your duty as a daughter to be able to,” her mother muttered under her breath, as if the conversation didn’t agree with her.

“That’s enough!” Zinnia’s father bellowed. He quietened the whole town with his words, the living room fell into the deepest of silences as they all stared at him, unable to believe such a sound had left his mouth. “She’s here now, she’s well and so are we. Is it too much to ask that we welcome her home again and listen to whatever she may have to tell us?”

No one dared add anything to that. Anthony remained on his spot by the door as Mrs. Erwin left for the kitchen, mumbling angrily to herself, and then a little less subtly to the man that Zinnia had once hired to take care of her family. Because, as it turned out, without her they really wouldn’t even begin to.

“Zin,” her father said once his wife was gone, “you shouldn’t be so harsh to Anthony. He has always been here to help us.”

“I just didn’t want to leave them alone with you gone,” Anthony said apologetically. “I helped when I could.”

“Thank you,” Zinnia grumbled in the least grateful of tones. “I do appreciate that.”

Her dad patted Anthony’s hand.

“He helped pay for the help, too.”

Damn it, Zinnia thought. Then that meant Anthony had really gone out of his way. Why, she wanted to know. He’d known she was alive, he’d known she was relatively safe. Had he pulled this trick so she would feel sympathy for him and go back to him, like a broken-hearted teenager? Because it had been a long time since she’d been that.
“Do I need to thank you again?” she told Anthony.

“You know you don’t.”

“Good,” she said, getting up. “I’m going to help set the table.”

Her father and Anthony soon followed. She hated to see how he belonged in a house where she’d always felt like an ugly piece of furniture. He knew where the cutlery was when Zinnia herself had to ask her father, he helped her mother arrange the food she had just bought, and he made sure her father never carried too much weight back to the living room. And she stared, unbelieving, at how her childhood house had become someone else’s home.

She didn’t say a word, of course. Diligently, she did what was expected of her, sat next to her father at dinner, and watched Anthony butter up her mother like a spoiled little brat without a mother of his own, which—at least that she knew of—he still had. She still couldn’t hate him as much as she wanted to, not because of this, at least. He had filled a hole in her family she would have always been too tiny to.

During dinner, she spoke little, not wanting to say the wrong things and start another fight. It was only when her father reminded her that she had something to tell them that she cleared her throat and explained things as plainly as she could. This was, after all, what she had come back here to do. To warn them, to save them.

She bit her lip and thought about how she could word this so it couldn’t sound like a made-up story like the ones she used to write.

“My girlfriend had things to do here in Central and I came with her,” she said, trying not to pay attention to Anthony’s clear disappointed eyes. If he had to suffer because Zinnia had moved on, she just wouldn’t take any responsibility for it anymore. It had been years, he should have moved on too.

“Things are getting tense in Central Command. We think there’s going to be a coup soon.”

Her father blinked.

“A coup?” In such a family of modest means and even more modest living, such a word felt too big in their mouths. City life lay miles ahead, far enough away that most of the time people in this town forgot they lived by city laws and were ruled by the same city people that were planning to do something with the country that would end them all equally, whether they lived here or there.

“More than that, probably,” Zinnia continued. “They’re amassing more weapons every day. And when it hits… we’re not sure how much of Amestris will remain as it is.”

“My god…” her mother muttered.

Zinnia had the good sense not to belittle that reaction. Despite what little she knew, she had a hunch it was all going to be highly destructive, and not just in the capital.

“And you’re sure of this?” her mother asked suspiciously.

“It’s classified information, but, yes, we’re very sure,” she replied. “That’s why I came back, to warn you. To beg you to leave somewhere as far away from Central as possible.”

“And with what money?” her mother said.

Zinnia crossed her arms over the table like a child having a tantrum. She brought news of impending doom and of course her mother just had to object.
“You can also stay here and die under enemy fire,” she said. “Your choice.”

“How soon will this happen?” her father asked, silencing his wife, who seemed just about ready to fire back at her own daughter.

“I can’t tell you. I haven’t been told much myself,” Zinnia admitted. “But it’s relatively soon. I wouldn’t be here otherwise…”

The news spread like wildfire. Her own mother took it upon herself to warn the neighbors, and then they warned friends of their own. Soon enough, the entire town was prepping for a war they had no idea would come when it would. That was the idea, that they had no choice but to run from an evil they couldn’t see or name.

Their own house was still a mess, though. Her parents were trying to decide what got left behind and what would go west with them, to a little place where friends of Mrs. Erwin lived. At least they’ve decided where to go, she thought to herself. She hadn’t told them she would be staying right in Central. They wouldn’t have understood. Leave them to their packing and their bickering, all I want is for them to be safe.

But, as always, that word and Zinnia weren’t very good friends.

From her bedroom window, Zinnia watched people leave on their horses or dragging their cows behind them in a steady pace, as if the country was already exploding at their backs, and she wondered if she had done the right thing, if she would manage to save lives with this. Selfishly, she also wondered if she would be remembered for it, at least by those closest to her.

Closest, she thought scornfully. Close, for a few days. Then nothing. Then just a relation.

‘Closest’ was in a mansion with her own parents, trying to do the same thing Zinnia was, and Zinnia hoped with even better luck. Perhaps when she was back, the house would be empty and the war would have started. Although, truth be told, the war had begun long enough ago that Zinnia was already starting to tire of it.

When will it end? She asked the room at large in silence. When will we all return to normal? That was, if there was any normal to return to by then. Whatever was happening, Zinnia’s stomach sensed already that it couldn’t be on the small scale or Olivier wouldn’t have risked so much coming south. An ice queen surrounded by trees and sunlight was queen of nothing, commandeer of no army. And Olivier with no army has as much power as I might.

Her mental ramblings were interrupted when a face from the past just came around the corner right into her field of vision. Zinnia’s first adult years came knocking at her door, bearing buckets of memories that never run out.

Hand-holding in the spring evenings, all those nights watching the stars, gossiping to each other about boys.

Feelings Zinnia hadn’t understood at the time and had only known to lock away, days that stretched far and fast because the only thing Zinnia could see were golden locks and green dresses, and that nagging truth sitting in the mouth of her stomach, aching to be released. Aching to be given some attention, some voice.

Dew.
It took Zinnia some seconds to realize she’d said the name out loud and that Dew had heard it perfectly. Their eyes locked in the short distance that separated them and when Zinnia regained use of her brain, she rushed to open the creaky window to say that name again, to call Dew to her.

A gust of wind came into her room, ridding it of all warmth it might have accumulated. She did not mind.

“Dew,” she said, a little bit more clearly this time.

It had been—Zinnia had no idea how long it had been, how long ago she had moved on over this girl she had once loved much more than she’d loved anything else. That Zinnia, young and foolish and confused, was not this Zinnia, and yet her body remembered.

“Hi,” Dew said.

Her face was just as Zinnia recalled it, thin and pale, and it perfectly matched the idea Zinnia had always had of divinity. She could have well come out of a marble sculpture of ancient times and Zinnia wouldn’t have batted an eye about it. And her hair… it shone under the winter light like a golden coin hit by the strongest of sun beams, cascading from her head to her chest. Perhaps she wasn’t so similar to a statue, perhaps she was a woman stepped out of a painting delicately preserved in the best of museums.

If Zinnia dared to close her eyes to the sight of her, she knew what her eyelids would show her. She knew she would relive every day of her life that she’d looked at Dew like that and she’d been too much of a coward to do anything about it.

“Hi…” she said now.

All of that—all the confusion and the intimidating beauty—had been a long time ago. She had learned.

“I didn’t know you were still … here.”

“I’m not,” Zinnia said before she could realize how stupid it was. “I mean—I am here now, but I don’t live in the town anymore.”

Dew smiled pleasantly. “I looked for you. Eventually, when I couldn’t find you, I had to suppose you were gone forever.” And somehow, she laughed softly at that, as if there had been no trace of suffering behind it. As if that ‘forever’ hadn’t been painful for the two of them.

Zinnia’s heart dropped all the way to her toes. Their story had always been about mutual suffering, hadn’t it? Once, she might have thought it was just about her own, but … if Dew had made the effort to mend their friendship after Zinnia had put it on pause, then that meant Zinnia hadn’t been the only one to feel about it all.

“You … looked for me?” she asked now, as conversationally as she could.

Dew nodded. “Seems I finally found you.”

“I only came for a few days,” Zinnia said. “It’s such a coincidence…” That I would see you again now, when the whole world is finally crumbling to pieces and it’s not just me that’s broken.

Because she had been so very broken back then, so lost in worlds she still didn’t know, in choices she hadn’t contemplated seriously. All it would have taken was a sentence, maybe two.
And, then, just the year before, all it would have taken for Zinnia to not want out of Fort Briggs would have been a sentence, maybe two. Someone else had said them.

She had not learned. Her reality still had too much power over her. Her memories thought they knew better.

“It is a nice coincidence,” Dew said, and Zinnia could tell that she meant it.

Then, Zinnia noticed the bag Dew was carrying. Nothing big or fancy, but sturdy enough that it must have weighed heavy in her arms.

“You’ve—you’ve heard about the news, then?” Zinnia asked.

“I didn’t want to believe it at first,” Dew said, looking around at the empty street. “But people have started leaving. It’s hard not to believe after that. Are you and your family leaving, too”

“Yeah,” she said. *Just not to the same places.*

Zinnia’s eyes fixed on Dew’s left hand. Something shone on it, something brighter even than her hair. A ring, old enough to not be recent, yet polished enough that it still was.

“I should go now,” she said. “My husband’s waiting for me already at the station.”

Dew walked closer to the window, smiling like she always did, like nothing mattered more than the two of them sharing a moment together, and kissed Zinnia’s cheek.

The world seemed to stop for a moment—and if it didn’t, at least Zinnia’s breath did until Dew moved away from her skin. Then, almost magically, the relief Zinnia had sought many years ago in leaving this town came to her in waves, in heartbeats that weren’t her own. Each of them was a drop of forgiveness. A drop of affection.

Zinnia, still recovering from the kiss, blushed hard.

“I—I hope you have a pleasant journey and arrive safely.”

“Same to you,” Dew said. And like that, she walked away. It was the only constant in their relationship, and it would always be. One had to always leave the other. But perhaps things now wouldn’t have to be so tense as they had been.

Watching her leave, Zinnia took what seemed to be the first full breath she’d taken in years. Whatever road had found itself intertwined with Dew’s life, Zinnia hoped with all her heart it was a happy one.

She closed the window with a smile and sat on the bed for a few seconds. This new breath in her lungs, it felt like closure. And she’d run after it for a long time, never stopping to think for one second that it had always been waiting for her right at her old home.

“I will never tire of saying goodbye to you,” Zinnia’s father told her at the station. They had bidden farewell to Anthony and his own family not even a day ago, and now it was their turn. Their whole lives fit on a suitcase as old as Zinnia that her mother clung to even when there was no one around that could steal it.

Zinnia and her father had left to look at the schedules to know when they could board their train. But
Zinnia suspected her father also meant to get extra corny, which he would be too embarrassed to do in front of his wife.

“And why is that?”

“Because if saying goodbye to you means you will come back to me, then it is worth it.”

Only her father could say things like those with a grin on his face. This, to him, wasn’t something to fear or to dread, it was just the way life was. *If only he’d been this receptive the last time I was here,* Zinnia thought to herself.

“I’ll come back,” she said. “It might not be something to expect, because I never know what I’m doing, but why wouldn’t I come back?”

Her father made a non-committal noise.

“Your mother, of course,” he said. “I haven’t failed to notice, you know?”

Zinnia decided to play dumb. This wasn’t something she wanted to talk about with her mother’s husband. With anyone else, if she trusted them enough, she might have—with Olivier, she had—but telling *him* of all people how she felt about his wife…

“Notice what?”

“That your relationship is as strained as it was.”

She couldn’t help but smile.

“What? Did you think that me living away would fix it?”

“I was hoping it might … soften you both,” her dad said honestly.

“Takes a lot more than a few years of solitude to soften a gal like me,” Zinnia said.

“You’re like her to that extent, aren’t you?” He laughed.

Zinnia had never stopped to think about that. Was *she* like her mother? Was she… intolerable, was she harsh, was she small-minded?

“I don’t know that I’m like her…”

“Oh, but you are,” her father said. “She has just forgotten. And so have you.”

Zinnia thought about it. She had never thought herself similar to her mother in any way. During the entirety of her childhood, she’d always depended more on her dad, who was home far more often, and who treated her like a child and not like a future butcher. Her mother had instead tended to instruct her the same way she would instruct someone else’s child. All Zinnia remembered from her first years of life was learning things about the world with her dad, and trying not to cower before her mother. Never, not once, had she seen herself in the woman that put food on their table.

“I really don’t think that’s the problem.”

Her father looked at her like she held the truth to the universe in her eyes. In truth, though, *he* did.

“Then what is?” he asked.
The problem is that she doesn’t love me, Zinnia wanted to say.

“I don’t know,” she said.

The floor beneath their feet began to shake slightly as a train approached the station. Zinnia watched it come the same way she expected to watch the impeding risks of the spring looming ahead, unmoving and ready.

When it stopped, her father took her hand and smiled, her mother standing up as well, waiting for the doors to open. There were kisses and there were hugs, and then her father climbed on board. Her mother remained on the platform, her eyes gentler than Zinnia had ever seen them. Even so, they did not speak. She just held out her hand for Zinnia to hold and Zinnia took it.

The train soon started to move west. Zinnia followed it with her eyes. All the life she had known in Central was in that train, or somewhere far away she didn’t even know. And yet it would be her dad she would miss most.

Because, with her mother, as much as her father said the opposite, there had never been anything to miss.

He’d asked her what the problem of their relationship was.

The problem is … Zinnia thought now, she never understood.

It was easy, far too easy, and that scared her. Alex might have been built like a bear, but Olivier knew all too well what it was to fight one and win. He moved the way all soldiers move, without hesitation, without allowing himself to have any. She had to admit he was precise in his strikes, even powerful. When he slammed his body against what he hoped would be his sister and instead hit a wall, the whole house shook.

Olivier smiled to herself often as they sparred. She hadn’t thought there would ever come a day she would be proud of her younger brother, not after Ishval. But the fact that he was holding up this well, the fact that he was playing along without complaint, those were qualities worth praising. Their parents would, regardless of the outcome of this fight.

She had no trouble avoiding his fists, the touch of his alchemy. It was easy, far too easy. She had been trained to put up with much worse, she had been born with much better talents, as if the strength of her father’s bloodline had accumulated mostly within her and the rest of her siblings had only ever seen embers of that fire Olivier could breathe.

Her parents awaited in the living room, all packed up to leave. The last thing to do before they drove away to the east was this quarrel. Whoever won would be named heir of the family and have possession of the mansion and its grounds. And, most importantly, whoever won would be head of the Armstrong family, capable of settling anything with their command. If Olivier won this—and she didn’t doubt that she would—they would all have no choice but to leave permanently. And that was what she wanted: an empty house, half-destroyed by punches and kicks and slammed shoulders on thin walls. A house whose previous inhabitants would be far away from, safe.

After a while, Olivier grew restless. Alex had the stamina to carry this into late evening, but she couldn’t afford the luxury of waiting that much. It had to end now.

When he came at her, she stood still, gave him the impression that he was going to win this, and at
the very last second moved aside and her brother hit a wall face-on, leaving a dent on it.

“Had enough?” she asked. She hadn’t even withdrawn her sword.

Alex smiled, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

“Not in the slightest!”

At that, she walked closer, taunting him. He didn’t lift his arms up to defend himself and instead just watched her. Without him being able to see her coming, again, Olivier kicked him in the stomach and sent him flying through the same wall he had dented. She heard his groan once he’d hit the floor.

Alex tried time and time again to get back up, but she always arrived too early to let him. When his back crashed against the chimney, cracks mounted up the structure holding in place. After she’d dragged him across the floor and he’d tried to dig his nails to the carpet, long scratches had been made. And the dining room, where the fight had begun, was now a battlefield of destroyed furniture.

Finally, Alex’s breathing had grown rough. He was on the floor once more, panting hard, his back turned to her. Without flinching, Olivier pushed a foot onto his back, flattened him against the blue carpet.

“Had enough?” she asked again.

At first, Alex shook his head, but when she pressed her foot harder on him and he saw himself getting more and more breathless from the obstruction to his lungs, he made a sound she knew to interpret as the end of this.

Slowly, she put her boot back on the floor.

Alex took one full deep breath, but he still didn’t act like he was planning on getting up anytime soon.

“The family … is yours,” he only said. He sounded like she had just betrayed him. He sounded just like he’d used to, like a child who saw himself as a shadow, nothing more. She might have seen him that way once, truth be told, but things had changed. They all had changed. And she knew by the way it hurt her he would think she was playing against him once again.

Olivier adjusted her coat and cleared her throat.

“You can go inform your father of your defeat,” she only said.

“He will need your signature.”

“I know,” she said, smirking. “But do you really want me to be there to see mum’s face when she sees that her precious little boy hasn’t been able to beat the black sheep of the family?”

Alex stared at her, then lowered his eyes and shook his head slowly.

“I’ll spare you that,” she said. “Nothing more. Understood?”

He left immediately, and when he came back, she knew the damage had been done already. She knew his defeat couldn’t have been well-received.

“You can come down now,” he said.

She did.
Her father’s office was quiet today. Catherine and Olivier’s mother waited by a corner in silence as Philip Armstrong gave Olivier the papers she had to sign to officially be the rightful heir of the family. Alex didn’t come in for that.

When her parents and her sister left, since a car was already waiting for them downstairs to take them far away, Olivier opened the doors to let Alex in. Just as she’d expected, he’d been dutifully waiting there, sweating and mulling.

In another world, she might have acted like the older sister she was, pulled him into her arms and told him it was all because of his own good, it was all done in the hope that she would be saving his life. But Alex wasn’t a toddler with nightmares anymore, he was a man and he wouldn’t be fooled so easily.

“What are you up to?” he asked her.

“That’s none of your business.”

“It is my business. It’s my house.”

“It was your house. Now it’s mine. It’s all mine, Alex. Why do you think our parents have left? Because they have no say anymore: I do.”

“I know that’s not true.”

“They left because I told them to.”

Alex watched her closely, calmly. He was the only man she knew capable of arguing without letting his emotions rule over him. She, instead, was a time bomb in arguments.

“And why did you?” he said.

She tried to remain immutable in the face of whatever he was going to say next. He wasn’t a fool, not anymore. And she had become more and more transparent with time, with wear, with affection.

“Why would you come here after so long and play nice with the senior officers?” Alex continued. “Why would you act like a sister to me and suggest our parents leave for a while? Why would you insist on earning back your right to inherit? Why, Olivier, if not because you’re doing what you always did best.”

And what is that, she wanted to know. She was good at swords, she was good at war, she was good at organizing. Once upon a time, she’d thought she was also meant to be good at protecting those under her. But time itself had proved her wrong.

There had been long streams of blood in the snow, there had been corpses piled up under the falling snow, there had been an arm and a horse…

“It is not a coincidence, is it?” Alex said. “You’re keeping us away from some reason.”

Slowly, Olivier walked closer. When she was face-to-face with her brother, she unsheathed the sword, carefully placed it where Alex could see.

“Stay away from Central or I won’t be so lenient with you next time,” she said, caressing his cheekbone with her sword, “little brother.”

Alex did not flinch away. Instead, he took her free hand.
"I hope," he said solemnly, "for your sake and the sake of your little friend that you know what you are doing."

Olivier scoffed.

"Just get lost, will you?"

But his eyes were telling enough. He knew. Of course he knew. No displays of possible madness and ruthlessness would make Alex Armstrong believe the sister he had looked up to growing up had gone mad. He saw right through her, just like her parents never would. Their father would go to his grave thinking Olivier just wanted them all away from her for a while. Alex would live on knowing she had done to protect them, and, if he was smart, he would take her unspoken word for it and go far, far away from Central.

_Protection_, she thought to herself now, alone in a mansion too big for just one person and too battered to fix on her own. *It’s what I owe to them, even now.*

But was this really the best way of ensuring the safety of the people she loved? Shunning them? What if they came back sooner than they had to? What if Alex never left? Would she be able to live with herself, then, if something happened to them? Would she blame herself for not trying harder?

Everyone was out of her reach now, everyone but one. One who refused to go anywhere, one who Olivier would have dealt with first if she had the necessary strength to.

Zinnia was still here and she didn’t know exactly what she was facing. Olivier lied to herself every day she woke up, told herself Zinnia was still in Central because she refused to leave and Olivier had no desire to fight her about this. But wasn’t it all about Olivier needing her there?

If she’d been smart, if she’d had the courage, Olivier should have already sent her away. Yet she hadn’t, and she didn’t think she would. Not only because Zinnia wouldn’t want to, but because Olivier felt immensely alone in a world she didn’t love, in company that thought her a traitor to her own beliefs. To them, she was a pawn they could play with, a woman they could step on.

With Zinnia by her side, Olivier still *remembered* what she’d been, still felt the strength of the north coursing through her veins.

*It is a selfish choice as much as it is selfless.*

But it was a situation she could still fix, even if it was just a little.

Perhaps, then, Olivier would feel less selfish. Although, truth be told, she was sure she would feel this way forever.

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Everything looked abnormally normal. The rhythm of the city had not changed in all the years Zinnia had known it. Cars buzzed past crowded streets where the people walked in as many directions as it was geographically possible, never looking up from the sidewalks, never stepping aside to let someone else pass. It was a city of entitled people who had learned the world circled around them, after all. The greatest powers of the country remained there, well-secluded in a bastion that could be seen almost anywhere in the city. Central Command was distinctly the tallest building.

When Zinnia planted both her feet on Central grounds again, it was the first thing she saw. The light was barely fading on the left corner of the horizon where it stood, a beautiful painting made of
strokes of air that blurred the power residing in the building. Everything that would happen, everything that had already happened was because of the people who worked in there.

Some of them, anyway.

How could everything be so normal when those few planned to change the world for their benefit? Could it be that no one really knew? She did, but only because she’d been at the right place at the right time. And because she’d known which buttons to press. Perhaps if Olivier hadn’t put the Elric brothers behind bars, Zinnia wouldn’t have been so lucky as to find out Central was planning something big.

Could it be that no one else was up to date? Any day now the sky might fall on their shoulders and they might still refuse to look up from their polished shoes.

And as much as Olivier meant to do the right thing by everyone on her country, Zinnia doubted she had thought about those who she couldn’t reach. The Armstrong family was now probably safer than it had ever been, and understood their eldest even less than they always had, but what about other families?

They weren’t being given a chance at all. They would be kept there like livestock until the day everything went to hell. They would be the ones to suffer. And all because no one had thought of them in times of peace.

.Maybe it’s time I did something about that… Zinnia thought to herself. Little as she thought she could do, at least it would be something. She had managed to get her whole town evacuated, hadn’t she? And all it had taken was telling her loved ones. If she told just a few people, here and there, that the city was no longer safe… would they think her mad? Would there be any who believed her enough to leave?

When she finally arrived in the street where the Armstrongs’ house was, she was no longer thinking about that. She was all giddy inside. It had just been a few days of separation, but it had been the longest time for her, the longest time away from the life she loved and cherished more than the life that waited for her back with her parents.

She could only just hope Olivier had dealt with everything swiftly. If Zinnia’s own worries weighed heavy, Olivier’s could sink ships. And that woman could be extremely good at self-sabotage.

She’d send her own armadas to the bottom of the sea if that meant someone back at home didn’t have to drown. She’d jump into the ocean in a storm if she could save them all.

Maybe the danger of Olivier’s worry wasn’t the fate others might meet but the one she might seek so that the rest didn’t have to die.

Instantly, Zinnia’s giddiness faded.

Even through the black gate and the distance that the gardens covered, Zinnia spotted her. A tiny dot of dark blue sitting on the stairs, surrounded by dirty white and the dying colors of the sky above her. She was the living portrait of defeat.

The closer Zinnia got to her, the more she saw that war Olivier kept well-hidden within her for no one else to suffer or even notice. It was a war as old as she was, and as unwinnable as life itself, and what was life but a game everyone who entered it lost?

Olivier’s sword was in her hands, and for a moment it looked as if she was caressing it, getting herself lost in the shades of the horizon that reflected on its surface, momentarily black and blue and
orange.

The living and breathing image of war, a woman of thirty-five years who had wanted to fight all her life and who now seemed to never want to fight again.

Zinnia stared at her from the bottom of the stairs, as curiously as she might look at a child playing with pebbles on the shore of a river. This sight was as unusual as it was raw. Olivier never allowed anyone to witness her in moments when the elements within her came to life beyond any of her control.

“You look like an idiot,” Olivier finally spoke, still choosing to face the reflecting edge of her sword rather than the world. It was so Olivier-like, to pretend that everything was as normal as it was for the rest of the city, Zinnia almost laughed.

“How would you know?” Zinnia said, going up the stairs slowly. “You’re not even looking at me.”

“I don’t need to look at you to know that.”

Finally, when Zinnia was standing right before her, Olivier looked up.

“See?” she said. “Like an idiot.”

Zinnia put her hands on her hips.

“You don’t see me for a few days and this is what I get upon my return?”

“Would you like a hug?”

“As a matter of fact, I would. I actually took my time during my trip to miss you.”

Zinnia sat down next to her with a sigh.

“It’s not like I expect the same level of emotionality from you, but… I don’t know. Calling me an idiot doesn’t seem very nice.”

“I’m not nice…” Olivier muttered.

And Zinnia couldn’t help but feel like things must have been very twisted inside Olivier’s head, because she was, above many other things, kind. And that mattered more than seeming like a nice lady who gave money to charity and took the time to personally oversee her subordinate’s hairdos, like her own mother.

‘Nice’ was only for show, ‘kind’ was what Olivier didn’t see within her and yet what Zinnia knew motivated her. Why else would she go as far as she did to save those she cared about? Love, of course, was not the only emotion Olivier was capable of. Many others came with it, whether she liked it or not. Whether she was able to acknowledge them or not.

But they had had this conversation before, and whatever Zinnia said, Olivier thought she had things very clear. It often happened, the human eye was quick to see other people’s problems with astounding clarity yet failed to even recognize their own.

Zinnia sighed and looked up at the same sky Olivier was watching.

“Is it done?” she asked, even if she knew it must be.

This bout of drama could be nothing more but a display that originated in having pushed people
away once again. Sometimes Olivier could be such a toddler…

Olivier replied: “It’s done.”

“Then what are you doing here, Olivier?”

Her eyes met Zinnia’s at last. She didn’t find the comfort there she’d also hoped to find in the stars.

What was she doing there? Waiting? Waiting for what? There was nothing in the world she could be waiting for. Nothing but the end of this, the days when she would be allowed to return north where she belonged and lose herself in the routines of the past.

“You have an entire house to yourself and yet you’re sitting here.”

“It’s nice out here,” she said. “I wasn’t allowed out much when I was a child. And I always liked the gardens.”

“That’s a story I haven’t heard.”

“There’s many stories you haven’t heard.”

“Let’s go inside, then,” Zinnia said, gently squeezing Olivier’s forearm, “and you can tell me some.”

And it was a very good offer. She had been sitting here alone for a longer time now than it was necessary, trying to find solace under the sky. It wasn’t the same sky she could see at Briggs, the stars shone more dimly, and the constellations were all tilted. It was, if anything, all much lonelier.

But she wasn’t alone now.

“I’m a terrible storyteller,” she muttered.

“I will be the judge of that.”

They stood slowly from the stairs and went into the house. Olivier had dimmed the lights inside, so they had to rekindle them, one by one. They did so silently. Olivier knew the stories had been just an excuse to get her inside, to get her to think about something else. There was little else, in her opinion. Just the war. The war that had started all other wars and the war that would end everything else.

She and Zinnia dined over whatever Olivier could scrape up. She hadn’t cooked in years and her skills were much poorer than she remembered, always a woman who knew how to get by, but it was enough, since her parents’ maid had left with them.

They spoke little, although Olivier was sure to add details about the life she remembered having in this house so that at least Zinnia’s curiosity would be sated. But the more she looked into her eyes, the guiltier she felt.

She was dragging her to her death, no matter how willing Zinnia was to let her. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t kind. And it wasn’t what she wanted to do deep down. But the words crawling inside her mind wouldn’t be either.

Suddenly, the entire world and all that lived on it had become cold and unforgiving. The whole world was ice, and she was no longer the ice queen. Those who hid in Central Command were monarchs of it all. They had always been and no one had known. Almost no one knew.

After staying up for a while in the living room, watching the fire, they went upstairs to Olivier’s room. There was no need now for pretending, was there? There was no one to pretend for. And even
if there would have been, Olivier was just so tired of the whole thing. Her parents would have never posed a real problem, the Führer had. And that was what she had to focus on, keeping Zinnia safe from that. Not keeping her from her bed.

But once there… Olivier couldn’t look at her, curled up right by her side, and not feel like she was doing everything wrong again. Still. How could she let Zinnia be there like this when soon—very soon—there would be nothing beautiful to remember?

The bed groaned underneath her when she moved to face Zinnia. She was smiling, probably happy to be back after a couple of days—happy and impervious to Olivier’s mood. She liked that. Someone had to be or the whole world would be as angry and restless as she was.

“Do I look like an idiot again?” Zinnia asked softly. There was also no need for that, no one would hear them. She could have shouted for all that Olivier cared.

Olivier just shook her head.

“I need to tell you something.”

“Oh.” Zinnia’s whole face froze on that single vowel. “You—you mean, like—”

Olivier almost rolled her eyes.

“Not that.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’re in my bed,” Olivier said, as neutrally as she could. “I wouldn’t break up with you while you were still in my bed.”

Zinnia snorted. “Point taken. Then what is it?”

“I need to talk to you,” Olivier said. “About… about everything. About why we’re in Central.”

And, then, finally, Zinnia was told about every single detail that the Elric brothers hadn’t given her. It turned out … Olivier was a good storyteller.

Chapter End Notes

‘Petite amie’ means, aside from its literal meaning of ‘small friend’, ‘girlfriend’ in French. It’s a loanword used often in English texts, but it doesn’t hurt to add a petite note to explain XD (also I like notes)
“This is emptier than I remembered. Where are the parents?”

“That’s none of your business, Mustang. Move along. And quit grinning. You look like a child.”

Zinnia happened to just be descending the stairs right that second, wearing nothing but one of Olivier’s civilian t-shirts from her youth.

“And who might that be?” Mustang asked, still grinning.

“I’m Zinnia,” Zinnia said.

Mustang went in to shake her hand. Well, more than shake it, kiss it.

“Colonel Mustang,” Olivier introduced him before he could.

“Charmed,” Mustang said.

Olivier grabbed him by the back of the neck of his uniform and pulled him back.

“Move it, Mustang.”

“Try not to piss her off too much,” Zinnia said.

Olivier glared at her. They walked away.

“She a maid?”

She didn’t reply.

“You’re awfully talkative, do you know that, General Armstrong?”

“Sit,” she said. He did. Now he didn’t seem so keen on observing the office. “What news do you have?”

“I’ve found a group of people already. Nothing too luxurious, but I believe I will do.”

Olivier blinked.

“You… believe it will do?”

“As long as we can smuggle the Elric brothers in, yes.”

“Smuggling two people inside a fortress like that won’t be easy.”

“I wasn’t counting on it, no. We’d also need to get the Führer out of the city, just in case. He’s more powerful than he’s let on.”

Olivier snorted.

“One thing at a time, Mustang.”
“I’m just catching you up. The plan has already been drafted.”

“Is that how much you appreciate me? You have me be the last one informed.”

“You’re the least approachable.”

She stared.

“I mean… you’re constantly being watched and it’s no easy feat to reach you safely.” He gulped.
“There will be an event in the east by the equinox. My team is making preparations so that the Führer
will not miss it. We will make way for the Elrics to get to Central Command, then.”

“This counting the army of the dead? The senior staff? The Homunculi?” Olivier sat up straighter.
“Your plans are as deceptively bad as you, Mustang. How many men can we count on?”

“A few trusted soldiers.”

“How many?”

“Hawkeye, Havoc, Catalina, Grumman, Ross. Plus allies Edward Elric has procured. I’m unsure
about their numbers.”

Olivier didn’t have to think about it.

“It’s not enough.”

“Have you contacted Briggs about this?”

“My men will not join us.”

“Then it will have to be enough, general.”

“I can only tell you that I’ve received orders to make this known, ma’am.”

Zinnia had been trying all morning. Person after person, she had tried to get someone to believe in
her word. That something was going to happen, something magical and dangerous, and that she was
tasked to tell as many people as possible to leave the city for the last few days of March.

“But we can’t just leave. What is this danger you speak of?”

“I’m afraid that can’t be known.”

“Then how do you expect me to believe you, young woman?”

“Because I’m…” Wearing my uniform? It wouldn’t be enough. She might as well be a crazy officer
wanting to spend some fun time outside of work. “Because it’s my job to make sure you do.”

“Well, it’s nonsense. We would be told if something was going on.”

I am telling you! Zinnia thought.

“Good day, young woman.”

Zinnia urghed so loud she was sure the lady must have heard her, but she just couldn’t care anymore.
Why would no one trust her judgment? She was wearing the colors of the military, she was speaking slowly and clearly and without panicking, and she was doing her damn best to be nice to people she’d never met in her life and that she was ultimately trying to save.

She leaned against a wall in the shade and blew her hair out of her face, just staring at the streets. If she wanted to warn them all, she would either have to shout or spend a week here, boarding one after the other.

It made no sense to stand here forever, working hard for it when no one heard her and no one cared. It didn’t matter how many hours she spent there. No one would want to listen, because she was a nobody. Because all they saw was just a woman speaking nonsense.

If she wanted to make them believe, she would have to tell them the whole truth she had just been privy to, but she couldn’t. Olivier would kill her.

But she wanted to. She wanted the whole city to know. They deserved to.

“Hello.”

She looked up to find a handsome young man smirking right at her. Her eyes went up and down his figure and she tried not to blush too hard, not that she could stop herself.

“Um, hi, hello!” Zinnia said, remembering that she had to say something. “Hi.”

“Oh break?”

She noticed now he was wearing an uniform as well. She could perfectly well understand how she’d missed that detail.

“Y-yeah, sure, I mean—” Zinnia said. “Yes. You?”

“Snuck out.” The man shrugged. “Want to go get something to drink? It’s hot.”

“Hot, it is…” Zinnia said, biting her lip distractedly. Then she remembered that she wasn’t exactly in a position to go get drinks with boys. “I—I thank you for the offer and all. But I’d better be getting back.”

The boy smiled and shrugged again.

“Maybe some other time, then.”

“Yeah!”

When he was leaving, she finally exhaled. She couldn’t believe she had just experienced a flirty moment after so long. Even with Olivier, there had been no actual flirting that she knew of, just pushing forward and swallowing every feeling, so being shown by a complete stranger than she still got this made Zinnia very happy indeed. Perhaps she could even exploit her talents a little bit more around Olivier now that she knew they were potent enough.

Plus, the boy had been cute enough to make her feel cute herself. Back at Briggs, she’d mostly just seen bears or young cubs—Buccaneer and Austin, for reference. There hadn’t been much ogling on her part, she must admit. She’d only had eyes for the one woman who ruled over them, the rest of the men had just been sort of there.

But now—oh now—she had an entire city before her. And if they wouldn’t listen to her warnings,
perhaps she could do something else with them and ogle. Ogling was a talent she was most skilled at.

She wondered if Olivier would mind her getting sidetracked now that she was aware there were more people in the world aside from them, and if Olivier herself had eyes for other people who she fleetingly met on the road.

There were plenty of pretty girls in Central for Olivier to gaze at. Perhaps it would even be healthy for her to get distracted. Even with Zinnia, now, Olivier could hardly think of anything else but her purpose in the city, and Zinnia was painfully aware that her company could do little to ease her.

She tried a few times more with the passersby, turning her panic down a notch, but no one wanted to pay attention to her. No one wanted to hear the truth, they would all rather live in their sheltered little world than face reality. And reality sometimes had to be faced.

It was still quite early, considering, when she decided to leave. She could try again tomorrow, there was still some time before March came.

She had never thought she’d actually dread the coming of spring as much as she did now. Olivier’s war would finally be upon them. And it wasn’t making any of them happy. They were alone for the first time in a long time and neither was enjoying it, because their solitude only meant their strength was diminished. Yet Olivier refused to ask help of the brave Briggs soldiers up north. She wanted to keep them out of this, too.

She wanted to keep Zinnia out of it as well, but she hadn’t succeeded. It took much more than sheer stubbornness to drive Zinnia away from her side.

But she also dreaded to spend time with her now, because all they were able to think or talk about was the war, the plan, and a victory that grew all the blurrier every day that passed.

Olivier had become a recluse inside her own house and Central Command, responding to little and wanting to do even less. Zinnia stood by her side, still and doubtful, ever wondering what she should do.

The prospect of facing that again for the remainder of the day dug itself into Zinnia’s heart, but she knew she had to. There was nothing else to do and nowhere else to go but to the mansion, to wait the days out. In the end, who knew if in waiting they would really be preparing themselves?

She walked the rest of the way, curious about the neighborhood and those humongous houses at either side of the road. They must all be pretty well-off, comfortable and more than just comfortable. She wondered what it must be like, to live a life where you’re not worried about money. For a moment, she couldn’t help but picture that life. Would the abundance of wealth have done something to fix Zinnia’s relationship with her mother? Would Mrs. Erwin have, then, learned that a butchery wasn’t the answer to everything and the core of the world?

 Probably not, Zinnia thought to herself, walking closer to another mansion. In the end, one’s life was the collection of many things, and even though you changed something in the long chain of events, that didn’t mean the endgame would too.

And Zinnia’s endgame was here, in Central. Back to the beginning.

 Back in this empty house.

Even now that it’d been a few days, Zinnia looked at the Armstrong household with well-earned respect, as if it really weren’t empty at all. There was a very strange sort of energy around it, inside it. Stagnant, even. Years and years of memories were being dutifully kept inside the drawers of the
mansion, never allowed out, and they had long ago begun to smell, only the permanent residents had forgotten to notice it. But to her it was clear as day.

“I know why you did it, but you are not going to get me to leave as well. I have the same duty you do to save my country,” was saying a gravelly voice inside the house, loud enough that Zinnia could hear it right when she was going to open the door and go in.

She had never heard that voice before. It clearly was not the other man’s, the one who came over sometimes and locked himself up with Olivier in her self-appointed office. Could it be the Führer?

She shivered just at the thought, but then reminded herself that such a man wouldn’t be talking about saving the country but ruining it.

“I don’t think you understand the severity of this.” This time it was Olivier who spoke, although she did so in an angry mutter that still carried all the way to the foyer. “I’m on thin ice, and so is everybody that has come here with me. Do you know what will happen if I am caught playing my role? Do you know who they will come for first?”

Zinnia swallowed guiltily. Everyone slightly close to Olivier would meet that fate if she was ever found out.

“All the more reason I should stay,” the man insisted. “To protect you.”

Olivier tsked. “I’m the eldest. I will do the protecting here.”

*Oh, so it’s Alex, then,* Zinnia thought. She really should’ve caught up on that sooner. Olivier wouldn’t really be talking about this with just anybody, secretive as she’d always been about it.

A few seconds of silence were followed by a long and loud exhale.

“Not this time. We’re not kids anymore. I think you are fully capable of leaving shame behind and just accepting my help for once.”

Zinnia could almost see Olivier frowning even if she wasn’t in front of her.

“Do whatever you want,” Olivier said. “I will not be made responsible for your death, are we clear?”

There were footsteps on the floors, which meant Olivier was walking away. Zinnia took this chance to open the door and get in, pretending she hadn’t heard a thing.

She had heard it, but she would be the last person to tell Olivier she had eavesdropped on a private conversation about her brother returning from the exile she had sent him into.

Things were tense as they were.

“The little one!”

Olivier looked at her, then at Alex.

“The little one?”

He joined his index fingers and blushed.

“She *is* little.”

“I don’t think it’s so much about me being little than it is about you Armstrongs being huge,” Zinnia
said, walking closer. She hadn’t properly been introduced to the mass of a man that Alex Armstrong was, so she had to stop herself from gaping. And she’d thought Olivier was tall?

Almost like Mustang had done, Alex got on one knee and took her hand to kiss it.

“Alex Louis Armstrong. Pleased to make your acquaintance, miss.”

“I’m—just… call me Zinnia,” she said, beyond stunned, but letting him do as he wished.

“A fitting name. You do have the face of a flower,” he said, getting back on his feet.

Olivier’s faces at the encounter should have been rendered immortal in a thousand paintings and exhibited at some museum.

“He’s always like this,” Olivier noted.

“I am … always like this, yes,” Alex agreed.

“I could actually get used to it.”

“Don’t,” Olivier said. She tapped Alex on the back of his neck and whispered to him: “She’s my girlfriend, you dumbass.”

“I am more than looking forward to hearing the story of how you won the heart of the Ice Queen,” Alex told Zinnia.

“I actually didn’t,” she said with a grin. And she really hadn’t, had she? Olivier had won hers. Olivier should be the one to tell this one story, Zinnia thought she might like to. Now that her mother wasn’t around and they didn’t have Buccaneer prying, Olivier was freer than ever to let go of her past and embrace the new possibilities.

But Olivier remained quiet and Alex remained expectant.

“How about we take this to dinner?” Zinnia suggested. “I’m starving.”

“Little early for dinner, isn’t it?”

Zinnia gave Olivier a look, practically saying out loud: Don’t you want to include your brother or am I reading you wrong? Lately, all Zinnia felt she was capable of was reading her wrong.

“I believe adjacent countries to ours do have dinner quite earlier than we do,” Alex said.

He had a kind soul, Zinnia could tell just from these few minutes she’d spent with him. He acted courteously at all times and there was this warmth in his eyes, like he was welcoming you into yourself. If Zinnia didn’t know he was Olivier’s brother, she would have never guessed. Aside from the one wisp of blonde hair he had and the color of their eyes, they were as different as earth and sea. Where Alex’s kindness seeped out of every pore of his skin, Olivier’s hid deep beneath the layers of her heart and was rarely let out in a visible way.

For a second, Zinnia wished she could have seen them interact as children. They must have learned a great deal from one another.

She looked at them now and saw the distance the years had carved between them, a distance she hoped they would lessen slowly, day after day. If she’d had a sibling, she would have liked to be in touch with them in a way that really mattered, without people getting in the way. People like her.
“I’ll just…” she said. “I think I’m going to get dinner, anyway.”

Olivier didn’t have the heart to remind her that she was a terrible cook and just let her go. She wasn’t done with Alex just yet. The fact that he had come back had struck her like lightning right over her chest. He shouldn’t be back, he should have learned to fear her enough to disappear, and yet here he was, fighting for his place in the family despite everything. His conception of family was opposite to hers, and yet she could understand why.

“She’s lovely,” Alex said as soon as Zinnia was gone.

“What am I supposed to say to that? Thank you?”

“You’re not supposed to say anything you don’t want to.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Alex. It matters little how lovely she is.”

He nodded solemnly. “It matters that she makes you happy.”

“Oh, god, please don’t pull this bullshit now. You going off-topic won’t change things. No matter how nice you act, I still want you out of here. It’s what’s right.”

“You can’t push us all away,” Alex said softly, looking her right in the eye. What he saw was the ice Olivier had thought forever gone from her heart.

She had pushed her soldiers away, pushed her parents to leave this land, pushed Alex to abandon Central, and pushed Zinnia to not know anymore how to navigate the waters around her.

And in a way Alex knew that had always been Olivier’s greatest defect. In protecting her family, she forgot to keep her own guard up.

“I’m not pushing you away.”

“You are,” he said. “Even if you did say you would stop trying to control what I did.”

“Someone has to…” she muttered under her breath.

He put a hand to her shoulder—it was as big as her shoulder, too. When had he grown so? When had he stopped being the child Olivier remembered sneering at during lunch?

“Olivier,” he said. “Stop. Just stop. There will always be people who would rather choose to suffer at your side than leave you alone to find safety somewhere else.”

“And I suppose that’s you, now?” she said, arching an eyebrow.

“Correct,” he said. “And your Zinnia, too.”

Olivier had only begun to glare at him, arms crossed over her chest, when Zinnia came back with a tray full of dishes.

“Didn’t feel like cooking,” she said. “Plus there’s a few staples we can eat.”

Olivier absentmindedly took the tray for her.

“Let’s go, then.”

They sat together in the living room, the two girls together opposite Alex. Zinnia had a feeling
Olivier didn’t like invading the areas of the house where she was reminded the most about her parents, the spaces that had belonged just to them, and she was thankful that Alex didn’t pry as to why they weren’t using the dining room.

For a while, Zinnia tried to be a good girlfriend and include a very silent and frowning Olivier in the conversation, but she seemed to be lost somewhere in her own mind, occasionally humming an answer but nothing more.

In the end, Zinnia just naturally fell into Alex’s rhythm. The two of them started talking about the tiniest of things and covered an impressive conversational ground. It seemed he was very fond of reading, too, and he happened to find her occasional proclivity for writing most endearing.

It was clear to her from the first few moments that Alex liked her. It wasn’t like anything else she’d felt before. She still remembered meeting Anthony’s parents and feeling like she was under constant scrutiny and could not fuck up in case they would hold it against her forever. With Alex as her sole audience, she didn’t have that pressure. He nodded as she spoke, always looking at her, and made all the appropriate comments.

And when he began telling jokes, smiling like a teenager, and recalling out loud instances of his childhood and Olivier’s, Zinnia just lost herself in it.

She caught a glimpse of Olivier almost smiling when Alex took off his t-shirt to flex his gorgeous muscles at her and Zinnia herself couldn’t help but giggle, get up to her feet, and touch one of his pecs with her index finger.

“Are these real?” she said. “Your sister’s aren’t that big.”

And if Alex Armstrong needed any more confirmation that this little flower girl was his one and true sister-in-law, that was it.

The battlefield before Fort Briggs was splotchy with blood and corpses, a chess board of white and red instead of black. None of those fallen men were Amestrian. No soldier had left Briggs since the first cannons had fired warning shots. They fought their war inside, a war that was a siege. Because that was how Olivier had devised it, and they followed her even in her absence.

Eventually, when all of this was over, they all would make sure to reemerge into the blooming world and clean the mess they had made, hoping they never would have to bring destruction to it again. Soldiers might join the military knowing full well there would always be wars to fight in, but only a few truly did have the heart for it. Fewer even would look upon the dead in the battlefield and not feel a current of fear go through them at the realization that these men were just like them, serving a country’s orders far away from their families.

At Briggs, despite the cruelty they all had learned to feel for the Drachman, they knew it was the right thing to give those men a decent burial. But for now, even if it seemed impossible, they had more important things to deal with. Things that sounded like a clock’s tick-tock in Buccaneer’s head since he’d heard Amestris had an expiring date.

After the Central soldiers, once come to ransack their home, had left in the face of war, Buccaneer and Miles had only abandoned the refuge of the fort to fight with their comrades and fire rain down on their enemies. The rest of the time they spent in Olivier’s office, planning what to do next, planning what the whole fort couldn’t know yet was their real plan.
For a few days now, uneasy from the lack of news, Buccaneer had been meaning to call Central. He and Miles had made up their minds time ago after that lady, Izumi Curtis, had called. What she’d said was something they just had to act on, even more so knowing Olivier was alone in Central dealing with it.

“Okay, I just need to ask,” Miles said before Buccaneer got to the phone. “What are you going to tell her?”

Buccaneer looked at him like he’d understood the plan wrong all the time and now Miles was making him realize after so long.

“What do you think I’m going to tell her? That it’s madness to do this alone and that we should be with her.”

“And what do you think she’s going to tell you?”

“I don’t know, Miles,” Buccaneer said, exasperated. “She’s never faced something like this before and neither have we. Maybe she’ll accept our help.”

“We’ve talked about this. She will not. She will go down with the ship rather than have to call land for help. Whatever we end up doing, we will have to do in utmost secrecy.”

“You’re suggesting I skip calling and we just all collectively quit this at the brink of war without even notifying her that we’re coming?”

“Glad we’re on the same page.”

Buccaneer stared at him for quite a while. Sometimes … sometimes, lately, he looked at Miles and didn’t recognize him. He was different when he wasn’t under Olivier’s rule—lighter, somehow. And pulsing with light, like he didn’t have a sun eclipsing him all the time. Buccaneer wondered how he’d never noticed before and ended up coming to the conclusion that Miles was hardly ever seen outside of Olivier’s little world. He was a little bit in love with her, Buccaneer knew. It was normal, he’d always told himself. But it felt even more normal now to see Miles like this, like himself. A new normal.

“When did you become me, Miles?” he said.

“When you began insisting that we do things the ‘right’ way, I’m afraid. This fort needs a head like yours sometimes.”

It was a compliment if Buccaneer had ever seen one, but he didn’t take it as such. Lately, the world had been turned over. North was south, Miles was Buccaneer.

“I can’t not call her, though. I want to know how she’s doing.”

“If she asks how we’re doing, you’ll spill it out. You’re bad at lies.”

“Am not.”

“I have evidence to suggest otherwise.”

“Where is it, huh? Where is the evidence?”

“Gossip-mongering and keeping secrets don’t go together.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t know how to lie when I have to,” Buccaneer grumbled.
“Maybe I should be the one to call.”

“Yeah, right…” Buccaneer chuckled. “Like you don’t feel morally obligated to tell your boss the truth and nothing but the truth, huh?”

Such was their relationship, in the end. Miles would do anything for Olivier. She was one of the few people he felt a moral obligation to follow. Well, maybe not just moral.

She was their leader, after all. And whatever his feelings were, he still saw her as such. Or so Buccaneer hoped.

“Not if I know she will not agree to that truth’s existence.”

They were beautiful words, said so very convincingly. It was almost a pity that Buccaneer wasn’t convinced. If Miles was allowed on that phone and asked the wrong questions, he’d spill everything out. Because he couldn’t lie like that.

Buccaneer watched him out of the corner of his eye. Even his posture suggested the same as his words. For a moment, he envied that. Buccaneer had only ever been able to convey exactly what was going through him.

But a decision still had to be made, and they both were in charge of that.

“Should we flip a coin?” Buccaneer said, and when Miles rolled his eyes, he added: “I’m serious.”

“We’re being stupid,” Miles said in the end. “Just call her. Stick to the situation here, ask her how she is doing. And don’t mention we’re going to show up as soon as this war is over.”

Buccaneer looked at him, put a hand on his shoulder.

“Miles,” he said. “You…you know we’ll have to leave before it’s over, right?”

This war wouldn’t be won in a fortnight. It wouldn’t be won in a month, it wouldn’t be won in two. Drachma kept sending men in, every day without fail, and Briggs stood, always seeing the light of the new day. It would be like this until either side was out of ammunition. Until either Drachma managed to infiltrate the fort or Briggs killed every last Drachman soldier on the wrong side of the border.

The phone rang through their silence, making Buccaneer trip over his own feet and stumble into the desk.

“Just pick it up,” Miles mouthed at him.

“I’m not even on the phone yet, you don’t have to—”

“Pick. Up. The phone.”

Buccaneer did, sitting down and crossing his legs. He tossed his braid with the hand that wasn’t holding the phone.

“Fort Briggs, how can I help?”

Miles tried not to facepalm. He sounded like a clerk in some office in Central who had just done his nails.

“General Armstrong,” Buccaneer said in his fully devout voice. “Of course, yes. I wasn’t expecting
She shouldn’t have called like this.

She was running out of things to do and she didn’t want to go back home to a parade of giggles and tea-drinking like she had two children for a brother and a girlfriend.

She just wanted… some normalcy, some taste of her old life.

Then she’d remembered the war up north. Her war, being fought by someone else.

And, of course, even if she’d called her office, Buccaneer had been the one to pick up. The biggest idiot in her fort. How she’d missed that.

“Don’t say anything. Just let me talk.”

“Of course, yes. I wasn’t expecting you to—”

“Buccaneer,” she said.

“Shutting up now.”

She could listen to his breathing, excited like a child. But this was her child, back at home, playing at being an adult. This was her old routine, when nothing had threatened to end all she knew. When nothing had been prepped for burning and the world stood on its axis still.

“How are things?” she said.

“Good. Currently winning, sir,” he said after a pause that she supposed was spent trying to decide if she really wanted him to speak now. “But it looks like this could still last a bit. When are you coming back?”

“Not as soon as I’d like. It looks like this could still last a bit, indeed,” she said, smiling to herself. She had to act like a sensible mum who had everything under control. She didn’t even think she had herself under control anymore. “Any casualties so far?”

“No one’s allowed out. This is more of a siege than an actual war, only we have cannons and they’re all out in the open.”

“Go on like this, and you’ll soon be victors.” She was so proud of them for doing this. She wished she was there, but in her absence she’d really left things in the right hands.

“How about you, general?” he finally asked tentatively. “How are things in Central?”

Olivier sighed.
“Moving slowly. I still don’t know much about what’s going on. But so far they don’t seem to … suspect me.”

It was worse than that. They knew, they all knew who she was and what she’d done, and yet they still didn’t care. Because she was a woman and because she was a prisoner in that city, in that building crawling with the dirtiest filth of the country. None of them could imagine she’d still find a way to slither out of there and plot against them. That was what happened when people judged her too early, they missed out on the important details, which she counted on.

But she couldn’t tell Buccaneer any of this, could she? She had to play her part for both sides of this. Right now, and after Buccaneer had told her they all were alive and well, the greatest hope she had for the lives of her men were for them to stay north where they could win a fight. She couldn’t let them in on what was happening south, unless they decided to join her there. And she knew they would if they ever heard.

“You need to remain safe, general.”

“I am.”

“They are the sort of men one should be careful of. If you need help—” He suddenly stopped talking as if someone had elbowed him in the ribs. “Not that you do, to be honest. They’ll be in more need of help than you when you’re around, eh?”

She smiled at the comment. It was nice of him to say.

“No incidents to report so far,” she said.

“I’m sure, I’m sure,” he said. “Anyway, I—uh—I’ll call you in a few days to tell you if there’s been any developments. Or, you know, you call me.”

“You can call, it’s fine. Just ask for me if you do.”

It wasn’t like they weren’t letting her have any contact with the exterior. If anything, they wanted her to know what she was missing. They wanted to make her miserable, and some days she wasn’t too sure they hadn’t already succeeded.

“It’s—it’s really good to hear your voice again, general. We all hope you are well. And … we miss you around here.”

“Don’t get corny, Buccaneer. I haven’t gone that far.”

But to any man of Briggs, anything outside of the world of ice and snow and rock that they knew was too far. In their eyes, she had leapt out of their universe entirely.

“Sir,” he said.

“Take care of yourselves,” she said, and then she ended the call.

She had gotten what she’d come here to get: reassurance that her people were still okay.

Now she could allow herself to go back home and endure.

It seemed all she did lately was that. Wait and endure.
Two more chapters and Arc III comes to an end!

There might be no new chapter next week, because I don’t know if I’m gonna have access to the word doc. But if there isn’t, schedule goes back to normal the week after that, so no worries!

It pushes the official ending by a week—again—and I don’t know whether to be sad or thankful. Sad because I don’t want to make anyone wait too much, and thankful because I admittedly am not ready to post the final chapter and type THE END. I keep wondering if it will really end to me, once it's all over XD but I guess I'll just have to wait to have my answer *blushes*
The duality of a painting

Chapter Notes

And here is the mushy stuff again (I needed it, I think I’ve exhausted myself writing canon)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Spending their days apart made them seem at least three times as long as they naturally were. It drove Zinnia to learn to process everything through the lens of a real servant, pretending to be who she wasn’t in order to give the right image, even if now she had no in-laws to pretend for. It didn’t help that, even though Alex was around, he tended to keep to himself often, just as Olivier did, maybe thinking it best that he didn’t intrude. And when he wasn’t working or tending to his own devices, Olivier didn’t take kindly to it. Once, both Alex and Zinnia both had gathered at the living room to catch up, like very good friends would, and Olivier had seethed at them so intensely they hadn’t been caught doing it again.

But it was the only solace Zinnia found in the whole of it. The house was big enough to get lost in, the city was even bigger (but the prospect of talking to irritable people who didn’t trust her word didn’t make that appealing), and Alex was nicer than she’d given him credit for, if a little insecure at times wherever his sister was involved.

Sometimes they would just sit together, knowing Olivier was either out on some gathering she didn’t want to attend or sealed away inside her office with Mustang. Add to that the taking phone-calls and locking herself up all alone because she wanted privacy, and Zinnia hardly ever saw her even if they shared a bed at night and a few meals a day.

She tried not to worry too much about it, remembering that at times life at Briggs had required Olivier’s full attention too. Now the only thing she had was sneaking out in the mornings to chase Central’s crowds in the hope they would believe danger hid in their futures. At least in Briggs she’d had tasks to do and the obligation to report to Olivier when Buccaneer would insist on it. Even if that was the only contact Zinnia had had with her, it had definitely been more plentiful than the one she had now. And it was getting increasingly hard every day that went by when all they did was exchange ‘hello’ and ‘good night’ before turning the lights off.

“She’s always been like this,” Alex told Zinnia one typical evening where they had the house to themselves and Olivier was not expected to be back till much later. They were together in the living room, having tea and biscuits in the same fashion and at the same time Mrs. Armstrong normally would.

Zinnia had tried not to sound affected when she’d commented over her tea how Olivier didn’t seem present anymore.

“And little elusive at times,” Alex finished her thought.

Zinnia took a sip from her tea and set the mug on the tray, shaking her head.

“I don’t think ‘elusive’ is the word.”
“She practically lived in her room when she was a teenager. Only came out for meals,” Alex told her.

“She’s an adult now. I think she should’ve outgrown that like we all do. I don’t know. It’s weird that she’s managing to not see us at all when we live together.”

Alex observed her attentively, looking for the right thing to say. It was true that his sister participated less and less at home, but he thought he knew her well enough to say it wasn’t something that out of the ordinary. He had plenty of memories to turn to in order to prove that she’d always been a little introverted in that way.

“When she is working to that extent,” he said, “it means she is worried.”

“But she won’t let me help at all,” Zinnia complained. “Or talk to her about it. It’s that whole ‘it’s my burden to bear’ thing.”

Alex chuckled lifelessly.

“My sister has always felt a tremendous responsibility for things that fall outside the realm of her duties. Even as a child, she took it upon herself to help raising our sisters and me. And when she enlisted, she did not only take time and effort to perform well, she also tried to improve the environment she was experiencing.” Gently, Alex put a hand over Zinnia’s. “Working is Olivier’s shield, little one. She feels she has to do her best at all times. If she doesn’t, she is not happy.”

“It definitely doesn’t help that now she’s working against the clock…” Zinnia muttered.

“No, I do not believe it does,” Alex said, still trying to assuage her. “But heed my words, it is not any indication that things are terribly wrong. It is merely a sign that Olivier has something she wants hidden.”

“Yeah, that’s not making me feel any better, big guy.”

“I’m sure it all is fine,” he said. “But if it eases your mind, how about showing her that you’re here for her no matter what?”

“I’m not too sure she wouldn’t take that the wrong way.” Zinnia urged. “She’s so jumpy lately. Anything’s a trap pulled against her and nothing I do is ever good enough.”

“Just try again, perhaps a tad more gently so she doesn’t fall back into old habits and dismiss your worry as illogical,” Alex suggested. “Her shields can be worn down. All it takes is a little patience.”

“More than just a little.”

“And perhaps also a good plan. Olivier likes good plans,” Alex said with a silly grin.

Zinnia elbowed him on the ribs.

But Olivier really did like that sort of thing, organized to the furthest possible extent, although normally she was the one to make it that way. Zinnia had never seen the situation backwards, someone handing Olivier a perfect plan to follow.

I guess I will just have to be the first one to try.
It had been so hard to sit through the usual meeting. For a while now, all there had been was boastful approaches on Central’s masterplan, praise to the new world they were going to build, and informing each other of any new developments on the war.

People died every day on every yard of the border, in either side of it. Olivier was tired of hearing casualty reports from generals who had never given a shit about the countries they were massacring. Some days it was Creta who had suffered a new attack, sometimes it was Aerugo, but Drachma was *always* and incessantly in the mouths of the generals. And the worst part was that they complained about how it seemed Briggs had the upper hand for now, wishing Olivier’s soldiers a heartless fate in the snow against the enemy.

All for a stone. All because they thought they had the right to sacrifice the entire country to become immortal beings. What would they even do with immortality? Even if they didn’t run out of life, the rest of the world would. Trees would stop sprouting, animals would start dying in mass, first the herbivores, then the carnivores (or was it the other way around?), and slowly the planet would be rid of anything edible. How would it feel like to be doomed to live eternal life in hunger? To have your skin scorched in the sun, your feet blistered in a desert that stretched as far as the eye could see? To see the rest of humanity die out day by day.

Olivier always left these meetings wanting to murder half of the senior staff—and that was a fairly optimistic point of view—but she knew there was little she could actually do.

Today she tried to remain neutral to most of what was being said and focus on anything new she might add to Mustang’s and her report on the Promised Day. A day that had been fated and marked on a calendar and that they had learned to fear. Their action was the last thread upon which Amestris’ safety was pending.

“Out so fast, General Armstrong?” someone hooted at her when she got up and pushed her chair closer to the table.

“I have some business to do in town,” she just said with a smile she hoped was believable enough. “If you’ll excuse me…”

“Why, of course,” he said with a smirk.

She left without another word, resting assured that they would continue to talk about her behind her back. As if she cared about what they would say. That she was weak and a woman with her hands tied behind her back and her mouth well shut, playing at being more than just a meek soldier. That her decisions were not true ones and that she should hardly be listened to when she did speak out.

When she exited the building, she saw Zinnia—of all people—standing near the entrance like she belonged there, her back to one of the pillars of the building, clearly looking out at the people walking past headquarters.

It almost made Olivier want to smile. A sight she didn’t know she needed to encounter until she had, that one was. Zinnia could be so damn curious about things, Olivier was sure she had lost her a thousand times to something a million times more entertaining that her permanent frown, and in a way she was glad for that. There was plenty to wonder at in the world that she didn’t want stolen from Zinnia.

“Waiting for someone?” she said to announce herself.

A voice in her head warned her against being too loud, or too familiar. They were under scrutiny, the eyes of Central saw even when closed. And a reunion out there spoke volumes if they behaved like
they normally would at home. Immediately, Olivier took a step back just in case she forgot she was not home.

“This tall lady with a kickass sword and really impractical hair,” Zinnia said, turning to her finally and hugging the pillar she’d been leaning on. She peeked at Olivier behind it. “Seen her, perhaps?”

“I think I have, yes.”

Zinnia went in for a kiss. Olivier stepped back again.

“Not here.”

“No one’s watching.”

“Not here, Zinnia. Don’t be a child.”

“I’m not being a child. You’re being you, there’s a difference.”

“I have my reasons,” Olivier said. “Now can we please walk away from here?”

“Your orders are orders for me,” Zinnia said brightly, in the hope that the stupid rephrasing of a popular saying would make Olivier laugh.

It did, however, make her snort.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Actually,” Zinnia said. “I was thinking we could do something else. Something nice.” She looked down at her feet. “If we go now, we all know what’s going to happen. You’ll go to your office and I won’t see you until dinner—and then it’ll be just for a few minutes and I’ll get mad and go read and you’ll go to bed and be half-asleep by the time I join you.”

Olivier was silent for a few seconds.

“I go to my office because I have things to do. I don’t do it because I enjoy it.”

“I know, it’s just—I never see you anymore. I thought it might be nice for the both of us to get out, have a drink, do some sightseeing. To be fair, I haven’t visited Central all that much.”

“There’s not that much to see,” Olivier said. “It’s a poor excuse of a military city.”

“It’s more than that. Plenty of people live here who have nothing to do with the military. There’s lots of art, and parks, and I’m sure there’s a pool. Cities like this always have a pool.”

“You want to go to a pool? In February?” Olivier arched her eyebrows and crossed her arms.

“I want to do something that doesn’t involve sitting in your parents’ living room,” Zinnia replied. “And what’s more, I want you to do something different from that. Please.”

Olivier thought about it for a second. She supposed it wouldn’t kill her to ditch her scheduled moping about for something a bit more engaging. The idea of having to choose that something didn’t please her terribly, but at least she had Zinnia to pitch in some more thoughts.

“Fine, what do you want to do?”

“Show me around, then we can improvise a little, eh?”
And just like that, Zinnia began leading the way, although she had no clue where she was going.

Olivier didn’t expect the improvisation part to be easy. Improvising and her didn’t exactly get along, but being in company kept her from being her usual grumpy self and far away from clichés.

Although, perhaps, she had fallen into clichés anyway. On their walk along Central’s streets, the first stop had been the National Central Library.

Zinnia saw it coming from afar, while they were still a street or so away, and she gasped.

“It’s not fair that you get to have such buildings here. Look at the architecture…”

Olivier puffed up her chest.

“It’s the largest library in our country,” she said matter-of-factly.


“Better or worse than pretty architecture?” Olivier said, almost laughing. Almost forgetting the day she’d had, the months she’d had. Maybe this had been a good idea…

“It’s what’s on the inside that counts, isn’t it?” Zinnia grinned like a child you have just shown a candy store to. “Those are … Cretan columns, aren’t they?”

Olivier linked her arm with hers. She couldn’t help it. Only Zinnia would get excited about something like this, so small, so simple. And only Olivier would lose herself in that excitement as if it were her own.

You’re far enough from headquarters, it’s fine, she kept telling herself. It was so sad that she was worrying about having her arm linked with Zinnia’s. What would happen inside her brain if they happened to want to hold hands?

“Inside, huh?” Olivier asked, trying to live in the moment. If only, it would keep her from the moping she’d decided she was going to abandon today.

“I’m dying to see how it’s decorated.”

“I thought you liked it for the books, you know?”

Zinnia seemed to think about it quite hard. She was very fond of books, they usually made her lose her composure a little bit, but the sight of the building, serene and majestic, was enough to heighten her excitement about architecture as well.

“It is the largest library in the country, yes?” she muttered.

“That’s what I said.”

“Does it also have novels and the like?” Zinnia asked. “Aside from military records and alchemic texts, I mean. I definitely am counting on those.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been. My parents bought all the books I ever needed.”

Besides, even if she had been, she didn’t think she would have looked for novels there.

“Oh god, Olivier…”
“Just come on. Don’t just stand there. Cretan columns, books on every shelf…”

As they approached it, Olivier’s heart grew bigger and bigger, just like Zinnia’s smile. She didn’t know one could feel so … full inside at something that to many had no worth.

As soon as they were inside the building, even if they were supposed to be quiet, Zinnia dragged her to every wall and every tapestry and each and every column, murmuring details and details that Olivier had never been aware of in her life.

It was this and that and war and peace and art. At least until Zinnia saw the books. The shelves reached as far as the richly painted ceilings would go and there was not a single free space in them. The volumes were every color imaginable and every width, and judging by the little labels inscribed on the shelves, they also were about every conceivable topic in the world.

Strolling around, Olivier took her to the botany section, just to piss her off. She tried not to think that a similar scene would have also taken place fifteen years ago, with someone else.

“Flowers?” Zinnia said, pouting. “Really? You killed me.”

“Has anyone ever been kind enough to mention to you that your name in itself is a flower?”

Now, on top of the pout, Zinnia crossed her arms tightly over her chest and grumbled:

“My father thought it was hilarious I hated flowers as a kid. He was quick to tell me and taunt me with it.”

To her surprise, Olivier smiled widely.

“I bet he’s the only one you allow to call you ‘his little flower’.”

“Him and your brother…”

“Well, you are little.”

While establishing eye contact, Zinnia hissed: “I’m going to pick up the thickest book in this area and smack it on your forehead if you go there.”

“Then you’d be asked out of the library and you would miss the section on maps.”

“This is why we can’t have nice things. You take me to places like this and then threaten to have me escorted out before the most interesting stuff in them has a chance to be in the same room with me.”

“This is a nice thing,” Olivier argued. By far, the nicest thing they had done since arriving in Central.

“This is making a scene. And while they’re fun and all to be in, I have no intention of being kicked out of here before I get to see everything in the building.”

And they did. They picked books in every aisle, on every matter. There was so much Zinnia felt compelled to read and so much Olivier felt curious about. The universe, for starters. There wasn’t much on that and there would never be enough, but every word they were able to find on what was out there and what the planets were like was a breath of fresh air. It was like stepping out of their heads, and they needed that.

Eventually, as it could not be any other way in a city where the most important examination on the topic was held, they found themselves in the alchemy section.
So this is where Alex spent most of his time before the exam, Olivier thought. There were more books than any person could ever hope to read in their lifetime. And wasn’t that a little sad? To have so much knowledge before you and know you would never manage to go through it all, to have to choose among so many different topics?

Zinnia’s steps echoed in the room. It wasn’t the time of the year for the future examinees to be scourging the books, preparing for the last test they were to face before they were named State Alchemists, so the room was entirely theirs, for a change.

“And people have to learn all this to qualify to join you guys?”

Leaning on a wall, Olivier scoffed.

“Not all of this. There’s more to alchemists than just books.”

“I should’ve have known,” Zinnia said. “Just by looking at your brother.”

“More brawn than brain.”

“Both, actually.”

“Still talking to him often?”

“I wouldn’t bother the poor man so much if you were actually around more to talk to me instead. But yes, I talk to him often. And he has a marvelous brain full of great ideas. I like him.”

“He’s—”

“A wonderful Armstrong,” Zinnia said softly. “And he’s not the only one.”

They walked around the room a little more. More to Olivier’s joy than Zinnia’s. Olivier kept stopping at times, picking some book in her hands to see what it was about, and then she put it back because she knew this wasn’t about her.

Then Zinnia came out from behind a corner.

“There’s an empty alkahestry section,” she said, eyes open wide.

“Why would it interest me if it’s empty? And if now there is no chance I can use it at all.

“Because it’s weird?”

Dragging her feet, Olivier came to see it.

Granted, the space allotted for Alkahestry wasn’t that big, compared to the rooms filled with other subjects, but she would have paid good money to have had access to it time ago.

She inspected it closely. The shelves were dusty, but there were marks on the back of them that could only have been made by having stored books there for long stretches of time.

It had obviously not been empty before. It had been emptied.

“Curious…” Olivier muttered, passing a hand over the bare shelf. Dust particles flew around her finger, some sticking to it.

“Why’d you think happened?” Zinnia asked.
“Someone must have borrowed them all,” Olivier said.

“Really?”

Olivier stared at her and laughed. “No, Zinnia.”

“I didn’t call here when I was on a quest for your weird books…” she said. “Should I have?”

“I don’t think they would have sent you any books to be sold. It is a library, after all.”

“No, but we would have found out if there were any books before.”

“There were,” Olivier just said. Then she finally looked at Zinnia in the eye. “Let’s get out of here. I’m starving.”

“Of course, the royal stomach needs to eat.”

And Olivier rolled her eyes.

They found a little place in one of the streets near the central ones and sat in the shade and shared a piece of chocolate cake, speaking mostly of the weather and what they should do next. Because it became obvious after a while that Zinnia didn’t want to go home just yet, and, honestly, Olivier didn’t either. It was so easy to put her brain on pause when things were like this, just having a normal afternoon like the ones they’d shared on opposite sides of a square up north. They could be the closest thing to a normal couple, aside from how they were always making sure to touch as little as possible, and that was worth the world to Olivier.

A touch of normalcy was everything when she’d had nothing like it in a long time.

After that, they ended up visiting every museum in the city. Most were crowded with war artifacts and war machines, but some had decent art to look at. Paintings done by ancient civilizations and paintings that made Zinnia sit down in a bench right in front of it for close to an hour while Olivier tried not to look at the nude portraits in the next room for too long.

The piece in particular Zinnia was so enamored with was something out of a myth. In appearance, there was nothing mystical about it. A man and a woman took up the main frame of it, their skins contrasting. The man’s was dark and warm, hers was pale as the cold surface of the moon, and together they stood in an environment that took Zinnia a long time to identify as being the sea. The woman, her hair intricately braided, had her arms around the man as she pressed herself to him, looking right into his half-closed eyes, full of longing. It was so intimate, the way their bodies were touching, without it needing to be any more explicit to be completely mesmerizing. In a way, their touch was far vaster than the sea they seemed to be standing on, human and solid enough to stop a hurricane. Then, when the eye was done absorbing every detail and color of it, you noticed what the piece was really about. The woman’s legs disappeared into a coiling tail and the man’s half-closed eyes were but a sign that he was under her spell. A myth of dangerous infatuation.

But Zinnia still liked it. Because things can be beautiful even if they are lies, or—in different words—they can continue to be beautiful after you find out what their real nature is. In this painting, there were no signs that the man was about to be dragged down by the siren, because the moment being told in it had been frozen at a time when all there was to be observed was the connection between man and siren, that glance that seemed to last for ages. So much could lie in that glance, and that bit of the story was up for the watcher to decide.

Zinnia looked at it with the eyes of someone who had lived something just as worthy of being explored a million times over, something as beautiful and as dangerous. She was the man, dark-
skinned and lost to awe, and Olivier was the siren that wrapped herself around her, threatening to sink her down and, most importantly, threatening to steal her heart away, if she hadn’t already.

This man didn’t just look like a man about to drown, he looked like a man who awed at the beauty of the siren.

“What is that supposed to signify?” Olivier asked.

Zinnia looked at her side and found Olivier there, sitting with her in silence. When had she gotten tired of ogling the tiny nude portraits in the aisle next-door and come back? Zinnia hadn’t even noticed.

“What?”

“His red robes.”

Zinnia looked again at the painting to try and find Olivier’s answers. At least they seemed like robes, sprawling over the rock where he was leaning. The hardly covered him anymore, except for the slightest fold over his shoulders.

“His last connection to the living world before she claims him.”

“Claims him…” Olivier chuckled. That word could be so easily misinterpreted.

“Underwater,” Zinnia said. “That’s what sirens do, don’t they? They lure people in so they can kill them after.”

“It doesn’t look like a killing scene to me,” Olivier said.

All she saw was the few seconds before a kiss.

“It’s not a pretty truth, or even an apparent truth, but that’s what’s going on, I think,” Zinnia said, without looking away from it. “It can still be rendered beautifully, though. A beautiful death.”

There was some silence in which they heard each other breathe.

“Sometimes… you know you’re going down and yet … you get so lost in the time before that happens that it almost makes it worth it.”

And then Olivier got it. Why Zinnia liked this painting. She saw her life—the unlived bits—written in every stroke of the brush. She saw herself as the dying fisherman and saw Olivier as the siren who was about to end him.

“There’s more to it than just that,” Olivier said. “There’s more than just dying in the arms of a pretty girl.”

Zinnia chuckled. “You sure?”

“There’s… living in the arms of a pretty girl.”

Zinnia laughed again. “Duh.”

“I mean it. Maybe she’s not going to kill him. Maybe she will do something to keep him from succumbing to her.”

“If she does, the man will never forgive her.”
And, like that, they were no longer speaking about the painting. And they both knew, thinking the other didn’t.

“You think he wants to die?”

“I think he’s ready to die like that, right there,” Zinnia said.

“I stand by what I said. They could fall in love instead of ending each other.”

At that, Zinnia stood up finally and smiled.

“It’s just a painting,” she said, moving on to the next aisle and the nude portraits Olivier had already seen before.

It was not, though, just a painting. It was their reality.

And Olivier wondered, as Zinnia marveled at the beauty of thighs so beautifully painted they seemed to be sculptures instead, if she shouldn’t do something about this. If it were her painting to finish, her painting to exhibit, would she allow that man to die at the hands of the siren? Or would she, if it was in her power, change it?

She decided she still had time to decide and put it out of her mind; Zinnia and her still had things they wanted to see.

For a while, it was easier. The meetings with the generals didn’t scrape the last bits of life out of her, and when she came home in the evenings she didn’t push anyone away. She only ever felt guilty about what she was doing when Mustang came over with his plans and his scant number of people to bring the fight to Central. The rest of the time, the Promised Day was only a looming shadow; she had a brighter sun shining up ahead, right in front of her.

Ever since the day of the library and the museums, Olivier and Zinnia had combed every bit of the city. Palaces and official buildings and more museums and houses of famous people, long dead. It was as cultural as it was romantic.

Zinnia understood Olivier needed to get out of the house, and Olivier understood she had to show up sometimes instead of letting the dread take her. She could hide under the illusion that things could still shine bright, that things could still be good. After all, wasn’t this what she was fighting for? So the world could still have this for many years to come? Shouldn’t she allow it to be, if anything, a reminder of what was at the core of her struggles?

They didn’t stay at the mansion much, just occasionally, but lately those times hadn’t been all bad either. Even with Alex around, which inhibited their behavior much more, Zinnia and Olivier found things to do. For starters, they had dissected Olivier’s room, starting with her books and personal effects and going through every story that included a cute girl on that bed when Olivier had been young. Those days were the best, just sprawling over that very same bed, giggling like schoolgirls and remembering good times, trying to build even better ones. In the future, if asked about it, Olivier would have been unable to relate those days to the same ones she lived in duress, hoping that her hard work and her suffering would lead to the safety of Amestris.

Those were days of picnics and cake in some quaint coffee shop that had gone undiscovered to them until now, days of buying civilian clothes for the both of them that they would wear when they weren’t on official business. Those were days of closeness.
As time went by and the sun shone a little more, spring coming full steam ahead, Olivier and Zinnia also made use of the gardens and the backyard of the house, setting the white metal table in the shade of a tree and eating there when Olivier’s duties permitted it.

One particular day, when the light was comfortably light and the breeze blew gently, they had decided to come out of the cool interior of the house to rest in the sun and drink something there, and Olivier had had the idea of bringing the family albums with them so she could show them to Zinnia, who had begged on more than one occasion to see those pictures. Lately, their relationship had much improved, they had ceased to be just roommates and had returned to the feelings that had once threatened to melt the snow of Briggs’ winter.

They were gazing at one picture of a child who was staring straight to the camera, her face very, very serious despite her age, hair straight and blonde, carefully combed so no stray lock would betray the image’s perfection.

Zinnia chuckled softly at it. She had expected exactly this of the Armstrongs’ parenting decisions.

“Who’s this? Amue or Strongine?” she asked.

Olivier sat back on her chair, putting her arm on the back of it.

“That’s me, actually.”

“Oh,” Zinnia said, leaning closer to the picture. “You really look alike.”

Or at least they had, when they’d all been children. The only sister Olivier felt she resembled minimally these days with Catherine, and solely concerning physique.

Olivier took the album from the table and got the picture out, handing it over to Zinnia to admire closely.

“Here.”

“Wow. Look at those cheeks. Someone was a cute baby.”

“I still have those cheeks.”

“But these are—I mean, baby! Blonde little baby,” Zinnia said, excited. This, she had never imagined she would ever get her hands on. A baby picture of the woman she was dating. It was something out of one of the dreams her brain entertained when she’d had too much for dinner.

Clearly, it was Olivier. It could not have been anyone else. Thirty-something years later, the woman still made the exact same face, as if she was not allowed to be ever at ease.

“Aw,” Zinnia said. “You look so serious.”

“I’ve always looked serious. It’s a family thing.”

“Your siblings don’t look like that. Gimme me that.” Olivier passed her the whole album and Zinnia flipped it a few times until she found what she was looking for: a picture of a much, much younger Alex, grinning at the camera despite having been made to wear a tailored suit and a bowtie. “See? Alex. Not serious. Actually looks like a kid.”

“It’s just one picture of many. He doesn’t look like that all the time.”

Zinnia kept flipping, taking one picture after another out of the pages. Then, she said:
“He does.”

Olivier took one in her hands to look at it. She didn’t remember this, she didn’t remember Alex being … so adorable, so child-like and sweet. Playing with a ball her parents had gotten him, hoping he would get interested in sports like his father before him. She remembered he had loved that ball, even if he was only allowed to play with it in actual pitches and never at home. Despite that prohibition, he had still found ways to sneak out into the gardens or his own room to play.

That kid she remembered had been happy, no doubt. Constricted, perhaps, by two parents who didn’t know any better, but happy to be in his family, to be an Armstrong. His face wasn’t round like hers, it was long and angled, and it definitely was not serious. He had been, as Zinnia had put it, a kid. And now Olivier had the pictures to remember him better, but she couldn’t help but wish she could also recall what he’d sounded like.

“He does…” she muttered.

“Oli?” Zinnia said. She sounded worried, so Olivier decided to put this behind her. Her childhood and Alex may have been different stories, but it wasn’t time now to focus on that. It was too beautiful a day to.

“I’m the only serious one in the family, aren’t I?”

“A little bit, yeah.” Zinnia rubbed Olivier’s forearm. “But it’s cute, too. You’re not getting upset about this, are you? You’re the adorably terrifying Ice Queen, taller than Fort Briggs, and prettier than any other girl I know.”

“Not a girl, for god’s sake. I’m not fifteen.”

“Woman?”

Olivier nodded.

“Still a cute kid.”

“Most of my pictures were official portraits, that’s why they’re … like this, though. Eldest daughter gets certain privileges.”

They went through some more pictures after that.

“Oh, I love this one,” Zinnia said at some point. There was a big family picture of all six Armstrongs together in the stairs of the house. The parents were at the back and the children up front, Olivier in the center of it with her sword, surrounded by her brother and sisters, Amue and Strongine at her left and Alex at her right, Catherine not even a prospect in their parents’ minds yet.

Olivier took a sip from her drink and said, without looking at Zinnia:

“We used to have it hung somewhere. Maybe it’s still there, I wouldn’t know.”

“We should have a tour around the house. See all the rooms you haven’t shown me yet. And that you have forgotten yourself.”

“I’d rather just … keep seeing pictures of my old life.”

“Your civilian life,” Zinnia said, laughing.

They slowly moved on to oldest family pictures from when Olivier was little and the only offspring
her parents had, a situation that hadn’t lasted very long. But it was the time in her life that had been more deeply documented in pictures, because once she’d grown out of her childhood, she’d stopped wanting to have a camera on her all the time. And, if she was being honest with herself, her parents had stopped wanting to take pictures of her, too.

There were wedding pictures as well. Zinnia couldn’t believe she was allowed to see them. Of Olivier’s life, of parts of her life that she didn’t show often or at all. It felt like she was still getting to know her, after so long. And there was some indescribable beauty to that.

“I love your mum’s dress…” Zinnia chuckled.

“It’s hideous. All her clothing is hideous. She is the reason I developed a certain disinclination towards anything with a skirt.”

“I’m pretty sure you hated them before too.”

“Look at this. She looks like a merengue.”

“With cream puffs on top.”

Zinnia leaned her chin on her open palm, elbow on the table.

“What were they like, your mum and dad? When you were little.”

Olivier sat back on her chair, ankle on her knee.

“Not that bad. I don’t remember much about that. Meeting adults, dressing like my mother wanted me to. There’s not much I can tell you.”

“D’you have a nanny?”

“We had maids that acted as such, yes.”

Olivier told her that it wasn’t like having a nanny per se. The maid was only there, silently waiting by the corner, while Olivier read books from her dad’s library and went on lessons. She hadn’t gone to school for one day in her life, all she knew she had learned at home with tutors, alone.

She also told Zinnia about how it all had started, when she had been old enough that she couldn’t be talked into doing what her parents told her to. She’d wanted to skip parties and swordfight more and she’d wanted to wear pants, not those flimsy shirts and skirts her mother prepared. And then when she’d had a bit more contact with the outer world, she’d realized she also wanted other things she wasn’t allowed to. She saw pictures of the first women to join the military in the reports her father read and she saw pictures of women in the newspapers and magazines her mother zealously consumed. And she saw the women who attended the parties her family threw. And by the time she found out that boys didn’t equate into any of her romantic and sexual interests in other people, she knew why she could never tell her family.

And she’d wished that was the only thing she would have to worry about. She’d also had to worry about all those other things that made her different, all those things her mother couldn’t allow her to be.

All those things she had become. All those things her mother still wouldn’t allow under her roof, if it was up to her.

“Come on,” Zinnia said, “she and your father love you.”
She said it, but didn’t mean it, and it showed. It was only the kind thing to say, the kind thing to do; dissuading her from thinking that her impressions of her family, well-settled in her heart by now, were only as true as she saw them.

“I would like to know exactly what they think they love about me.”

Zinnia took her hand.

“Well, if they’re not loving everything, they’re missing out.”

“Can we do something else?” Olivier asked, just wanting to change the subject.

“This is cool! I like seeing this stuff. I didn’t think you had such an extensive … family documentation.”

“Happens when you’re rich and bored and have nothing better to do. You document things.”

“You need to show me your private collections, too.”

“I threw them away.”

Zinnia arched an eyebrow. “That means you have a stash safely hidden somewhere. I want to see it.”

“I’m not going to show you that. I have more family pictures.”

“Okay, fine. Fine, fine. Gimme some sweet stuff.”

Olivier brought the outfits album forward from the pile she’d brought outside. It was an extensive collection of pictures of her and her siblings in many different outfits, all chosen by their mother.

“Here. Just… just look at it. And when you’re done with it, you tell me if this isn’t better than my ‘stash’.”

At least it would make Zinnia laugh at the general concept of it. If Olivier retrieved the old compilation of pictures of women she had amassed over the years, she was certain Zinnia would laugh at her. There was a bit of everything in that hidden stash, unclothed portraits drawn with cardboard and pictures of adventurers that appeared in the newspapers as revolutionaries for driving cars. It was as much a stash of beautiful people to look at as it was an inspiration for Olivier to become one of those women the world spoke about in awe.

Zinnia stared at her as if she had glasses and was looking at Olivier just above the frame.

“I’m still going to get my hands on your ‘stash’ and laugh at you.”

“It’s just pictures of women. Dressed women,” she went on to add, even if that wasn’t technically true for all pictures. “In pants and boots. I kept a stash that embodied the kind of person I wanted to be and couldn’t.”

Zinnia made a puzzled face.

“So you didn’t have anything to look at when you were feeling … gay?”

Olivier rolled her eyes.

“Usually, I had somewhere to go dunk all my gay feelings, Zinnia. There were girls in the academy willing to reciprocate that gayness anytime.”
“Oh.” It was a long ‘oh’.

“You think you and Ianthe have been the only ones?”

“Obviously not, you mentioned having flings. But… it’s weird that you didn’t have anything pretty to look at. I kept magazines and newspaper clippings when I was a teen, imagined myself marrying this sir or that lady. I even saved wedding dresses.” She snorted. “My mum hated me doing that.”

“You are the imaginative kind, it fits your personality better.”

“Of course it does. All you ever did, I’m sure, was pine like you always do and use your memory, didn’t you?”

“You know me so well.”

At that, Zinnia stopped paying attention to her and waved behind her. Alex had just come out of the house, neatly dressed from work.

“I will be right with you!” he said.

“I am under the impression that my brother likes this too much.”

“He likes you. I don’t know about too much.” Zinnia shrugged. “It’s good to connect, especially now.”

And it was. It was possibly the very last few drops of happiness Olivier would ever have, and she had promised herself (and Zinnia) that she wouldn’t let them go to waste. She could worry all she liked, but she was also supposed to overcome that and enjoy whatever good thing was right in front of her. With time, she had come to see that her family was one of those—her real family, which after all turned out to include one living relative.

“And…” Zinnia swooned. “He’s such a gentleman!”

“I should have known you would immediately hit it off with my brother, of all people.”

“I’m here most of the time and I already hit it off with you time ago. Who else was I going to talk to?”

“I assumed you left in the mornings to do something.”

“It doesn’t involve nice people.”

“Ladies!” Alex said, making his entrance grandiose in a very unnecessary way, hoisting an entire metal chair on his arms and carrying it all the way to them, then carefully sitting, crossing his legs. “What ever are you two doing on such a fine day?”

Olivier forced herself to smile and be pleasant. But she was annoyed. Brothers were annoying, it was a fact.

“Your sister was just showing me some pics,” Zinnia said. “You were always a handsome fellow. Charming, too.”

“Oh, my, someone with appreciative eyes!” he said, flexing to accept the compliment.

Olivier took it to heart, took off her jacket, and flexed too.
“I carry more charm in my fingertips than you do in your whole body.”

She said it in a way that was made clear she wasn’t serious, although her face was. Zinnia, understanding quickly, started getting red in the face as she held her laughter in for a few seconds, then exploded.

“That is not true,” Zinnia said. “You and charm are at opposite sides of the world. When charm was born, it asked to be put at a great distance away from you just in case.”

She continued to laugh.

“I am also stronger,” Alex pitched in. “Not just more charming.”

Olivier stopped flexing like he was and held her chin up high.

“Come on, prove it. Flaunt it.”

Alex got up and so did she. He took off his entire t-shirt to show off what the hid beneath it. He had more pecs and abs than any person should be allowed to. It was almost comical how big he was, and yet how gentle and nurturing he looked, like he’d never even thought about hurting a fly. The juxtaposition of that with the blue of his uniform puzzled Zinnia for a moment until the two siblings began to move around each other to try and take up more space.

Alex flexed and flexed and Olivier soon followed him, stepping in front of him. It was hilarious that she was trying to eclipse him when he was a full couple of heads taller than her and much broader.

By the way the sun shone on them both, all Zinnia saw were two idiots with impressively big muscles flexing, and the light reflecting on their fair skins in the form of sparkle. Alex was a storm of them, shiny reflections in every inch of his bare torso and shaved head. Olivier, though, only ever reflected light out of her temple, the opposite one that had been scarred in a war long ago.

Like this, they looked like true siblings, fighting over nothing and turning it into a spectacle to make Zinnia laugh. And she couldn’t believe she had gotten to see it happening in such a short time, after so much.

“As you can surely appreciate,” Alex began to say, “the size of my biceps—”

“—which I crushed under my boot not that long ago—”

“Not the point. We’re comparing size here, not ability.”

“Because if we were comparing ability, you would not be here making a fool out of yourself,” Olivier said, condescendingly.

Alex leaned forward, his head hanging backwards just opposite Olivier’s. They looked like toddlers fighting about who got to pour sauce on their ribs first.

“You’re the one trying to one-up me.”

“And you’re the one acting like you did get all the good genes.”

“I never said I got all the good genes. I just got very good ones.”

“And I look like a mailbox, don’t I?”

“The building and the mailbox,” Zinnia said, holding her stomach from laughter. “Sounds like the
“You shut up,” Olivier said, letting her hair flap in the wind. “You don’t get to decide who is the fairest Armstrong.”

“Sure I do. I have criteria.”

“What criteria?” Olivier asked.

“Any choice I make will be validated by how much I like you two and how I am actually capable of telling you apart. Because, if it weren’t because Alex is a building and you have long hair, people wouldn’t know who’s who.”

“They would. I am much nicer than my sister.”

Olivier glared at him but didn’t break posture.

“I’m not even going to bother.”

For the rest of the evening, it was like this. The two siblings acted like such, enjoying the back gardens like they had never been allowed to in their youths. They ended up covered in dirt and sweat from trying to chase each other around when the teasing got to be too much. Zinnia sat in the fading sun all along, clapping and laughing and thinking she must have done something very right to be able to witness this. To see Olivier free and careless and not at all thinking about the danger that loomed ahead.

It had to be a gift, and she treated it as such. She dwelled on it, on each instant of it, and she promised she would write down what amazing days she was living so other people would one day have access to her joy.

She began writing mentally, putting on Olivier’s jacket over her shoulders when the sun went out and it began to get colder, and even though she knew she would forget most of those mental words later, it helped her fall in love more with what was happening.

After a while, Alex had to leave. He said he was meeting some friends of the office for drinks, and, formally as ever, he said goodbye to the two of them. He even kissed Zinnia’s hand again before he left.

With him already gone, Olivier plonked down on the chair that she’d taken previously and exhaled loudly. What a day it had been, she felt giddy inside and tired at the same time, and she hadn’t felt that alive in a long time. Longer than she even knew.

“Cold?” she said when she noticed Zinnia had stolen her jacket.

“A little. I wasn’t running out there with you and it shows.”

“Let’s get back inside, then.”

Olivier rose from her chair and offered Zinnia a hand, although instead of taking it Zinnia just inspected it as if she expected it to bite her.

“It’s a little early for dinner, don’t you think?”

“Nobody said we had to have dinner as soon as we get back inside.”

“We could … read? Talk? Make dinner?” Zinnia said. “All wonderful ideas, aren’t they?”
“Not your best, but you’re getting there.” Olivier kissed the crown of Zinnia’s head. “First, let’s get these albums back where they belong. Then you can think of something else that doesn’t involve being pathetic.”

“We can drink your father’s expensive booze!” Zinnia said.

“Less pathetic,” Olivier conceded.

“I knew you’d like that one,” Zinnia teased. Even if Olivier had a taste for strong beer, she probably wouldn’t say no to fine liquors, especially if there was no one around to judge her drinking.

Together, they cleaned the table in the backyard and stacked the chairs. Olivier was the one in charge of lifting the table itself and carrying it to a corner near the house, so it wouldn’t just be there in the way.

Once inside, they stayed in the living room for a while, drinking in moderation, and when it was totally dark in the gardens except for the streetlights, they decided to head upstairs for the night.

“I like your brother,” Zinnia said, looking at her, hand on the banister. This was the sort of thing she wanted to convey fully. Fitting into the notion Olivier had of family made her feel warm and soft inside, like she had finally achieved something important, something she’d never really expected to ever have for herself. “He has a gentle soul. I wouldn’t have thought so just by looking at him.”

“I noticed you’ve taken a liking to him, yes,” Olivier said, frowning. Her initial bout of apprehension notwithstanding, it wasn’t as if she disliked it. All the better if her last remaining family got on well. But she’d always been the only Armstrong for Zinnia and selfishly wished she could continue to be. Now Alex had stood between her and the sun and that had cast shadow on her, showing the truth of her nature, which she strived to keep hidden. She was but a sad woman without that sunlight.

Zinnia quickly realized that this was no small matter. She descended a few steps down the staircase and smiled at Olivier, even cupped her face with both hands.

“I like you, too. Even after you’ve basically become a mummy inside a tomb.”

Olivier languidly kissed Zinnia’s left knuckles, a ghost of Alex kissing her goodbye in the same manner. This was, though, in no way a goodbye. It was an invitation prior to the one in her words.

“I’m your mummy,” she said.

Zinnia, going on the opposite direction Olivier had planned, actually began laughing like this was the best joke she had ever heard.

“It’s impossible to try to flirt with you,” Olivier complained after a few seconds.

“No, no, no, it’s fine, it was really good,” Zinnia said, still losing her entire shit. She had tears in her eyes from crying. She tried to get back to being serious so she would sound like she meant it, but as soon as she did she remembered and starting giggling again. Olivier had really gone big on that one, probably without even meaning it. “I promise, I’m not laughing because it’s bad. It was great.”

Olivier just stared at her. It was better to just wait it out and then go to bed as if nothing had happened. Not all invitations could always be welcome, after all.

But Zinnia saw that grumpy face and the way she was biting down on a pout and she just couldn’t take it anymore. She cupped Olivier’s round face once more, gently, now not laughing anymore, just experiencing the pure bliss that comes after.
“It’s not your fault I’ve the mind of a fifteen year old,” Zinnia said, her tone an apology. “It was really clever. I wish I’d thought of it.”

“So why was it funny?” Olivier said, her body rigid. Zinnia tried desperately, almost as if a little drunk, to mold it to its usual shape. She was all hands, all over Olivier’s cheeks and shoulders; hands that now no longer hesitated at her touch, accustomed to hovering over it and to feeling it against her skin.

She leaned towards Olivier’s mouth and spoke almost into it.

“Because … of course you are,” she muttered. Eyes closed, she moved closer, just a little closer — “Of course you are…”

And she trapped Olivier’s lips in her own like a carnivorous plant devours an insect, quickly and securely. Only this was a dance, not the culmination of the food chain.

“I really do prefer you to your brother,” Zinnia said after a while of kissing in the stairs, of being all hands in the stairs and having to stop several times because long hands were long, and what if Mustang came over? What if Alex returned because he had forgotten something? She didn’t want this to be more public than it already was. “At least when we do this.”

“Don’t try to fix it now…” Olivier grumbled, eyes closed as she pulled Zinnia closer, hands wrapping around Zinnia’s waist, then coming back at the front to tease at the buttons of her uniform.

“Wasn’t trying to.”

When Olivier’s hands distractedly found a spot where to let her hands infiltrate Zinnia’s upper uniform and landed on warm skin, Zinnia inhaled deeply as if she was trying to control her breathing.

She did, enough to at least manage to climb the stairs without even seeing where she was going. Olivier followed, blindly. It said a lot about her that she would, a leader that had not always learned to be led, not always learned to trust someone to take the lead. Zinnia had no idea how to be a leader, but she knew how to take Olivier’s hands—hers and only hers—and guide her somewhere. Olivier would trust Zinnia with her life, no matter the cost or the circumstances. If she ever found herself in a life-or-death situation, she knew she could close her eyes and be safe, she knew Zinnia would not let her fall into darkness.

The question was, could Olivier approve of that?

Their erratic steps did not take them to the room they had planned, but little else they could have done to find their way when they already found themselves in the in-between of lengthy kisses and pauses with their eyes closed.

When Olivier turned on the lights and opened them, she gasped mid-kiss.

It was her parents’ room. They had reemerged in her parents’ room, of all the rooms in the house.

And she laughed. Of course she laughed, how could she not?

“I was conceived here,” she said, a little dazed at the serendipity of the scene that spread out in front of her, the empty space she and Zinnia were about to, surely, fill. “Not Alex,” she quickly added. “He was conceived on a flimsy trip, which explains him.”

Zinnia kept pulling at her to move, then dropped down on the cold surface of the mattress that
smelled like perfume and detergent, and looked into Olivier’s eyes.

“What?” Olivier said.

Zinnia’s smile was angelical.

“Want to make another Armstrong heir?” she asked, totally serious.

Olivier blinked.

“You know that’s not actually biologically—”

Zinnia started laughing again, both hands on Olivier’s upper arms. “Now who’s not letting who flirt?”

“You’re so—” Olivier leaned down to kiss her. “—stupid sometimes.”

Her breath on every word vibrated like the words themselves.

“Okay,” Zinnia said. “Let’s go, general.”

“You dare giving me an order?” Olivier whispered to her ear, hovering before her like a deeply sensual apocalypse, like a goddess who held the power over all mortal lives in her hands, in her lips, in her eyes.

“I dare doing—” Zinnia said, slipping her hand between the fabric of Olivier’s black top and the center of her chest, the place where the sternum gave internal way to her heart. Her fingers rested there in pause. “—a lot of things.”

Olivier bit her lip.

“Show me, then,” she taunted her. “Show me what you can do.”

And Zinnia did.

That night, in the gardens, in every bed available, on the stairs to the entrance, inside one of the cars, against the walls of the dining room. Every place was a perfect spot to say to each other without words that they were both there, that this was happening, and that no matter what was coming nothing could take this away from them.

It was a way to escape that looming future, to pretend it was still a long way away, a distant reality. But it was also Olivier’s doom. In appreciating what she had, in loving it more closely than ever and without worries, feelings sank in.

Feelings that had been nagging at her for days now, but that she’d managed to push away, to order away. Zinnia would kiss her and bring her food when she was working or they would lock themselves in a room while Alex showered and time seemed to freeze for a moment, and a part of Olivier’s head knew very well that she was only postponing the inevitable, but she didn’t mind that as long as this was still her reality. This: the unspoken, the barely explored yet, the always sensational connection.

Yet, eventually, all others things caught up with her.

It was one of those lazy nights when the house was quiet and their stomachs were full when her mental state was flooded again by the future. They sat in bed together, both reading something and commenting the stories aloud from time to time to each other. Olivier felt like she was on a cloud,
almost at home. When they smiled at each other at a particular passage, her heart filled with joy—it was, without a doubt, joy. She hadn’t thought she could still feel that. All it had taken had been a few days of being grounded to the parts of her world that still remained.

Out of the corner of her eye, she quit reading to stare at Zinnia. She looked so placid while she read, like she saw nothing else of the universe except the world the book put forth for her to reach. This was Olivier’s reality, nothing else: a woman that had left everything to keep her safe.

It hit her right there, with the sharpness of a breath and the beauty of Zinnia’s face. Olivier couldn’t let this die in a war. It would unarguably be one of the worst things she’d ever done if she let it come to that. Because, no matter if she and Mustang had a plan, the possibilities of it working enough so that everyone came out alive were minimal—and Olivier had known from day dot. She just hadn’t cared about her own odds. She had trusted it would be enough to count on alchemists and soldiers alike for the infiltration. And she knew that Briggs would find a way to thrive without her, if they were managing to go through a war without her as well.

She’d known, as well, that if Zinnia remained in Central she could not be allowed to participate in the skirmish. It would be too dangerous for her, too confusing.

I will have to lie to her again, she thought, disappointed in herself. Because if she presented Zinnia with the truth, Zinnia would do what she always did: refuse to stay back in the safety of the background. She would go where Olivier went if danger was what she was meeting.

And Olivier would not have that, not without having any hope of winning.

She’d have to talk to Mustang about this, ensure Zinnia was kept somewhere far enough from the Capital when spring finally came. And … she’d have to leave instructions for someone to come get her after everything if Olivier herself could not make it.

“Hey,” Zinnia said all of a sudden, snapping her thought in half. It would find a way to reconstruct itself later.

Shit, she’s stopped reading and I didn’t notice.

“You okay? You’re very pale.”

“Fine as ever,” Olivier lied.

How could she keep doing this? How could she still keep lying? Zinnia would never trust her again if she ever found out about this. And she would do well in doing that. Olivier had lied too many times, kept so much from her in the past. Even if it was for her safety, it was still a dishonest thing to do, not the ideal foundation of the relationship Olivier wished she could build. It seemed the situation was never ideal to build that relationship and she was only ever allowed to have scrapes of it.

“Everything’s okay,” she mumbled. But Zinnia didn’t seem to hear her, so it did not matter.

Chapter End Notes

The painting Zinnia describes in the museum is The Fisherman and the Syren by Frederick Leighton (1856-1858), one of the pieces that inspired my Adversity Mermaid AU—and, if anyone’s curious, the siren is really drowning him in retaliation for killing
the fish ^^, I must admit I took my liberties with Zinnia’s interpretation of it.

The try at writing sexy stuff goes for freckledlesbian (I still can’t write smut, but I do my best at hinting at it) <3
Be the ivy on the wall that survives the winter

Chapter Notes

Last chapter before Arc IV begins next week!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This was the last place he wanted to be, yet the first where he should. He had left Riza at home, clinging to her corgi, all the lights turned on, and he only had done so for a reason.

He had few allies in Central, but those he did have he would tell the news to tomorrow, when the day was new and the fear that had settled in his heart had dissipated slightly. But he needed to see Olivier Armstrong now; there probably would not be another chance to communicate this to her, as he tried to visit sparingly enough so it wouldn’t rouse suspicion. Even so, these days he worked like this, torn between two sides of the same city.

Because he was a man, he didn’t fear what could hide in the darkness that waited between streetlights. Walking alone in a deserted neighborhood didn’t make his heart race, his senses prickle. If he was afraid, it was of the shadows themselves, shifting as he eclipsed the light. Every step he took, he tried not to look out of the corner of his eye at the sidewalk, where the shadows licked leisurely, but most times he failed. When he did check there was nothing abnormal in the way the shadows covered the dimly lit street, his sweaty fingers gripped the bouquet he’d acquired downtown on his way here and he gulped.

What ever General Armstrong would think of the news he brought, he didn’t contemplate. It was his duty to bring this information to her in the most discreet way possible, avoiding suspicion. She was greatly distrusted in Central Command, and lately he had become a target of the same behavior. The powers behind the Promised Day knew, and well they should, that neither Armstrong nor Mustang were on their side but merely pretending to be. His being careful now only amounted to how little he wanted to be accused of treason before the final day came.

At last, he arrived at the gate, an intricate design of black metal that in the dark Prussian blue of the night could almost trick the eye into thinking it was completely transparent.

When he approached the gate, an elderly man tending to a bush of roses lifted his head to meet his eye.

Mustang cleared his throat.

“I’m here to see the general,” he only said.

The gardener held his gaze for a few seconds, recognizing him, then he left the pruning shears on the grass and opened the gate for Mustang, who came in a little bit abashedly, aware of the man’s prying eyes on him.

After the gate closed again, the man went back to tend to the flowers. A bit late for trimming roses, Mustang thought to himself. But he had been in this property enough times to know already that the Armstrong family was, if anything, peculiar.
He kept his eyes on the flowers he himself had brought and the card he had written to adorn the gesture. Would it work?, he wondered. Would she understand?

When he looked at where he was going again, he met an image that almost made him turn back where he had come and be the bearer of bad news on another occasion. He almost dropped the bouquet right where he stood.

The stairs that led to the entrance of the mansion were the only well-illuminated part of the outdoors by far. They shone as marble might, proud and stoic and, most importantly, immutable through time. And on the very last step towards the house, Olivier and her adjutant sat. Well, Olivier did. Her adjutant was on her knees instead, a few steps lower on the stairs than Olivier, her face clearly meeting the center of Olivier’s bare chest, then moving to either left or right. Mustang averted his eyes at once. His fame notwithstanding, this wasn’t something he wanted to be witness to. He knew Olivier’s reputation could very well devour his own in one bite.

Neither woman seemed to be aware of his presence there, a sole man who was barely visible beneath an ample bouquet of colorful flowers and who stood alone in the immensity of the Armstrong property like a single soldier stands up to an army.

He debated whether he should turn back and return tomorrow, after his allies had heard of the news first. But then, with a resolve he had to fish from the depths of his soul on such a bleak night, he began ascending the stairs.

The image was less disturbing up close, if anything. It was the only chance Mustang had ever had at seeing Olivier at her most human, head tilted backwards, eyes closed, breath heavy between her lips. For a moment, he almost smiled. He should have known, no adjutant would put up with Olivier for so long without incentive. Besides, Olivier had always struck him as oddly permissive with the woman.

“Perhaps I should be back in another moment, general?” he spoke at last.

Olivier opened her eyes slowly to the sight of Mustang standing right in front of her. She blinked, as if to see whether he would disappear once her eyes got accustomed to the light again.

“Mustang,” she said, as Zinnia unglued herself from Olivier’s breasts for a second, sucked dry of any reaction for the moment except an intense blush. “What a lovely surprise. What do you require from me during such a nice evening?”

It seemed to her that Mustang was blushing slightly, too.

“I insist, I can come back. Tomorrow, perhaps.”

“No nonsense,” Olivier said. “You’re here now. Get on with it, I am doing things.”

“Hi, I’m things,” Zinnia mumbled under her breath. Then, she demurely stood to her feet, trying not to rest her eyes for too long on Olivier’s still exposed chest. “I’m going to—uh—set … the table for dinner. I’ll leave you two alone.”

She disappeared into the house faster than Mustang would have given her credit for.

Olivier, on the contrary, leaned both arms on the floor and stared up defiantly at Mustang, very much undressed. He wondered if she was testing him or just pulling his leg.

“Shall we walk, general? You have lovely gardens,” he said politely. “Although they definitely are not any fairer than you yourself.”
“Do you practice those lines, Mustang? Or are you truly that pedantic when you are left to your own devices?”

It was now that she began to do the buttons on her jacket, aware of Mustang’s eyes on her. The time for modesty and seriousness had arrived, apparently, and he was most thankful for that. He didn’t think he could keep appearing calm and unbothered by this bout of exhibitionism. Not that he was one to judge what one did in their private property, but it was, regardless, an unusual sight.

Once Olivier stood, she glanced at him, her eyebrow arched.

“‘Well?’” she said. “‘Have you just come here to interrupt my free time or do you actually have anything to report?’”

“I wouldn’t dream of interrupting your anything, Armstrong,” Mustang said.

“And yet here we are,” she said. “‘Shall we?’

He nodded, and she led the way down the stairs. For a few seconds, they walked in silence, then he cleared his throat.

“We have finally figured out a way to not succumb so easily to Central’s forces.”

Olivier scowled.

“What do you hope to achieve with that? We are facing an immortal legion,” she reminded him.

“True,” Mustang granted. “But they will not act without orders. And someone will inevitably have to give those. Presumably, the Führer will.”

“There is one rank above him, Mustang,” Olivier said, solemnly, her eyes lost in the bushes of flowers for a moment. In this fight, they were facing too many different fronts that disguised themselves as one. Any measure they took would require a countermeasure, in case the former failed. “We all know who pulls the strings.”

“We have to assume he will delegate.”

“Assuming won’t get us anywhere. We need concretion.”

“You’re not even aware of what our tactics will be yet, how can you have such a solid opinion already?”

“I know you, Mustang. Anything you might have thought up will have incorrigible faults.”

He smiled pleasantly.

“And that is why I share it with you, Armstrong. Your perspective will be most helpful, I am sure.”

She scornfully blew her hair away from her face.

“What is your plan, then?”

It wasn’t much, as Olivier had suspected. But, in Mustang’s defense, hardly anything they had in store for the Central force would be enough. They were facing something much larger and stronger than themselves. And yet they persisted, because neither Mustang nor Olivier knew how to give up. Perhaps that was why she still tolerated him enough to work with him, she knew he wouldn’t quit things midway; he would risk his life if it came to it, just like she would.
As much as this counted as an advancement, Olivier didn’t think, once she’d heard the whole of it, that kidnapping the Führer’s wife would act as a powerful shield against the enemy. What would they care if they held hostage the wife of one of their own? For all Olivier knew, Mrs. Bradley was innocent, living in the shadow of one of the most dangerous men in Amestris, possibly the world.

She refrained from judging Mustang’s plan again. She had said her piece before, and she still stood by it, but what good would it do to tell him another time? They were both aware of what things were like.

“That’s all we have for now,” he told her at the end of it.

She inspected him almost with pity. What were they both doing, fighting a battle that was lost already? Why were they continuing to be stubborn? She almost told him, how foolish this was, how idiotic they were being. They were standing near the very edge of peace, still hoping to build a bridge before the enemy came and vanquished them.

They had been defeated the second the enemy was visible on the horizon, and Olivier knew this very well.

“If it’s all we have,” she said slowly, “then it will have to do.”

She hoped it did, for all of their sakes. If this kidnapping ensured that there would be some sort of negotiation between sides that allowed for the Elric brothers to infiltrate the fortress, then Olivier would go to her grave knowing Mustang had done something well. If it didn’t work, then there would be no choice but to fall fighting.

“There’s still time, general,” he told her, much too optimistic for her taste. He still had hope, she could see it in his eyes and his ridiculous smile. Sometimes, in moments like this, she was sure there was no possible way he could fake it.

There’s still time… How could he still cling to hope this way? Time was almost upon them, mercilessly. Next month, everything would come to an end. And all they had fought and built would crumble as they fell to their knees. She had accepted this, her end. And she had planned for it in as much detail as she had been able to. If she was enjoying her days now, it was precisely because she knew that Mustang’s words were the empty-hearted speech of a man much too young to bear what he bore alongside her.

“If my team comes up with anything better, I will make sure to come to you as soon as possible,” he finished.

She looked upon him again. Young, he was. Young and worn, both. She couldn’t figure out where the hope pitched in, where it hid. Was it beneath the tired smile, beneath the bags under his eyes? Was it hidden deep in his absurdly noble heart?

“You will, won’t you?”

“Without your resistance, Armstrong, we would lose one hell of a fighter.” He smirked. “Wouldn’t want to stop counting on that. What do the rumors say? That you took twenty men alone once?”

She tsked.

“How irresponsible of you to believe rumors.”

“I have never had the pleasure of having a personal account of what happened.”
“And you still won’t,” she warned him. Then, thinking of her plan, of her legacy and her will, of what she was leaving behind that she wanted to prosper, she softened. “You can count on me for killing every last man in that building, as you know. That should suffice for now.” He nodded. “But I must ask something of you, regardless.”

Mustang blinked, surprised.

“I’m intrigued.”

“The girl,” she said, her face hard as stone. “I want her away by the time the Promised Day falls upon us.”

“I see…”

What he failed to see—so did she—was a shadow in one of the windows of the house’s last floor, retreating into the darkness so as not to be caught eavesdropping.

“This is the only property I have inherited as head of the Armstrong family,” Olivier continued as they walked. “And it’s much too close to the city, far too close. You have connections, colleagues you can count on. Can you find a safe house for her?”

“Have you told her of this?”

“What is it to you?” she grumbled. “Will you do as I ask or not? It’s a simple question.”

“So you haven’t.” Mustang’s smile turned sour.

“Of course I haven’t. Most civilians appreciate being evacuated, not her. She would fight with tooth and nail to stay if she knew. And I would have to bend to her will.”

Mustang chuckled lifelessly. “The north has vanquished their old queen, crowned a new one.”

She growled at him.

“Fine, fine,” he said. “I’ll see to it that she has somewhere to go.”

“And you will report to me with whatever you’re able to find for her,” Olivier noted. “I want to know where she is, in case—” She stopped herself short of saying ‘in case I make it’. There was no making it, which was precisely why Olivier was sending Zinnia away in such secrecy.

“You can count on it, general.”

“Thank you,” she said. And she was doubly grateful when he didn’t joke about having been gifted with the thanks of the Northern Wall of Briggs. Now she was a wall of nothing, she stood alone against tide and wind, and when the storm was finally unleashed upon her, the embers burning in her heart would be put out with rain.

“So,” Mustang said, a little livelier. “This is quite an impressive household, very fitting for your family, I must say. In terms of size, you could fit the whole of Briggs in here without anyone noticing.”

She looked back at the house, grayer than white in the dark of the night, and scoffed. If he planned to use the Armstrong family home to house soldiers, she wouldn’t object. It was empty, anyway. She had made it be so, might as well put it to good use.

“I suppose so, yes,” she said. “If you like it so much, perhaps I should leave it to you, shouldn’t I?
After all, why not? It’s not like it can fit inside my casket.”

“You’re … not going to leave it to any of your siblings?” he asked. Not ‘you expect to die in this fight?’, because he might be hopeful still, but he was no fool.

“What use can this house be to the deserter of Ishval, two married chickens, and a little girl?” Olivier said, trying to imprint sheer stubbornness and dislike into it. But she didn’t mean it. She was just doing her job, perpetually protecting her lineage. “I’d rather you have it.”

Unsure of how to take this outburst of complicity, Mustang decided to change the subject again. They walked some more, sharing a few more details of the plan, names of people Mustang planned on involving and those that already were, although he doubted Olivier was familiar with any of them. After a while, she led him to the gates of the property, indirectly hinting that he should leave already, and then he remembered he hadn’t just come here for a friendly discussion of the plan.

His hands, still sweaty, brought forth the bouquet that Olivier had mostly ignored during their conversation, unsure who it was from. Now she would know who it was for and why.

“I was told these are your favorite,” he said, handing them over to her.

“Hyacinths…” she muttered. Her mind flipped a cascade of images and scents at her. Greens and pinks and greys. Stone and tapestry and cotton. The smile of a girl close to her own mouth, the smile of a botanist surrounded by flowers. How else could she remember what made this flower different from all others? How else would she know how to call it? She’d once had a hyacinth in her arms, too.

In the delicate foldings of the flowers, there was a message, a little card written in ink. She almost killed Mustang right there for the gesture, until she opened the card in her fingers and read what was inscribed in it.

Her heart fell all the way to her feet. If she had been Mustang, she would have lost the last of her hope right then. Instead, because there was no hope left to lose, she just nodded.

Mustang smiled at her again, all goof and no substance. She didn’t know what Lieutenant Riza could see in him. Then again, Lieutenant Riza did like men, so perhaps it wasn’t so much about Mustang being Mustang but Mustang being a man.

She almost smiled back, then he said:

“Do you know what they signify, hyacinths?”

“I must confess I don’t.”

Mustang’s smirk grew and grew until it touched both his ears.

“Lady-like beauty.”

Without a second thought, Olivier threw bouquet and message both to the ground, then produced a lighter out of her pocket and lit the pile on fire without breaking eye contact with Mustang.

“Get the hell out of my property,” she spat at him, but this time it was only for show. Only in case someone was watching, as Mustang suspected. They had been safe when they had been deeper into the gardens, but so close to the gate anyone could hear, and anyone could be a spy.

Mustang left with a mock salute. She must admit, he knew how to play his part well. It made her
Olivier watched him leave, and when she returned her eyes to the burning pile of flowers, she saw it burn for a few seconds until the flames died, having left behind a calcified and unreadable mess.

Then, making sure there was only ashes left, she headed back to the mansion, weary. It had been a long day. She wanted nothing more but to go back to the mood Zinnia had stolen from the center of her heart and brought forth for the world to see: the last living coals of joy. Mustang had made sure there was water poured over them, and the sizzle of their death upset Olivier. Where would the days go, if she didn’t have anywhere nice to put them?

She only had to push the door open for a breeze of niceness to hit her right away.

“Aw,” Zinnia said when she saw Olivier walk in empty-handed. “Why did you throw the flowers away? They were actually pretty.”

“I find it hard to believe you’d ever have any proclivity towards flowers, so nice try, but no.”

“The poor man made the effort to be chivalrous and you do this.” She tsked. “No wonder no man is ever happy with you.”

Olivier glared at her.

“I’m not happy with any man either,” she said.

“Not even Mustang’s deceptively subtle techniques?” Zinnia asked, giggling.

“Any advance from Mustang is twice as disgusting as when it comes from any other men.”

“He isn’t half as disgusting as other men I know,” Zinnia said.

“Please tell me you’re not actually considering his attractiveness. He is a child, and a cocky one at that.”

“Nobody ever said that was a bad attribute,” Zinnia said, smirking.

“I will not tolerate dick jokes under my roof.”

Zinnia tried not to chuckle too loudly.

“So what’d the cocky bastard want?”

“He was just checking in with some details regarding the plan. Nothing solid for now.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you? You always say that.”

“He also tried to get me to go have dinner with him. As if!”

“And you threw his flowers away.”

“Again with the flowers. You didn’t even see how he offered them to me,” Olivier said angrily.

Zinnia made a face. It was slight and subtle enough that Olivier didn’t pick up on it, but if she had been paying attention, she surely would have noticed what it meant. She and Mustang had been spied all along, just not by any Central envoy.
“Well, you could have kept them for me.”

“You don’t like flowers,” Olivier reminded her.

“But he paid for them. Someone should have taken them and put them somewhere nice.”

“Enough of this, I’m tired.”

“You weren’t tired twenty minutes ago,” Zinnia said, seductively.

“I am now. I’m going to bed. Putting up with Mustang has exhausted me.”

She quickly got rid of her uniform and put on something a little more comfortable, as Zinnia watched her, dumbfounded. How could Olivier pretend so well? How could she act like nothing out of the ordinary was happening? Day after day, for the past couple of weeks, things had been fine, better than fine. They had grown closer in the face of adversity, looking away from it until it came at them. And they had been happy, Zinnia knew they had been. For a moment, for an instant, but there had been real happiness there, the lasting kind if the situation would allow for it.

Then this night had come to pass. And Zinnia, ever the watchful eye over Olivier, had discovered something she had never wanted to admit was possible. Olivier didn’t plan to survive the Promised Day. Olivier planned to go down fighting, estranged from her world and her people, defending a nation she no longer believed in and hoped better people would rebuild. And Olivier was still willing to play pretend, to lie down in the bed they shared and continue this happiness, now feigned, in the morning. Zinnia’s heart went to hers.

Zinnia’s mind raged with the wrath of a woman who knew she couldn’t do anything about that and with the knowledge that Olivier’s resignation to death wasn’t the only thing to worry about. Olivier planned to die in battle, yes, but, worst of all, she planned to have Zinnia sent away.

And, that, she couldn’t look past.

But Olivier knew nothing of this. She hugged her pillow and faced the ceiling, unknowing that nothing would happen according to plan. She replayed in her mind time and time again the findings that Mustang had passed on to her, the final straw of a plan that hopefully would culminate in something more hopeful than just their deaths. There were children involved in this, children who should not have to die for a better country. It was a soldier’s duty to fall in such an endeavor, not theirs.

And now, more than ever, Olivier couldn’t deny that every last man on her side would fall. A new creature of darkness had been created and they had never even guessed, not after finding out about the truth about the leader of the country. How could they have been so blind? How could they have been so trusting?

Selim Bradley is a Homunculus.

That had been the message Mustang had almost forgotten to share with her. And that had been the last of Olivier’s well-hidden hope floating away in the night, never to be seen again.

Out of the seven Homunculi she had knowledge of having ever existed, this was the fifth that posed a threat to Mustang and his allies. The fifth, a Homunculus that would not leave Central City with the first when Bradley travelled east.

The fifth—and god only knew what he was capable of and what he had already seen. Olivier would
have to wait until Mustang visited again to be able to find out more. For now, all she could do was try to sleep, even if her dreams would be filled with evil.

Things seemed to be the same even if they weren’t. Olivier had made a promise to herself to live before she died, to taste the wonders of this world before war took her. War had always been meant to take her.

Zinnia and her run out of museums to visit, they ran out of parks to have lunch at under the shade of the ever-green trees in the brink of spring, and soon just walked, finding new streets every day. The city was ample and growing every day, there would always be somewhere to be, something to do when Olivier wasn’t required at headquarters.

At least in the shade of the building, the sun—growing more and more intense every day, its light calcifying—wouldn’t touch them and they could still bask in the coolness of the mornings right before spring came. Spring, their enemy, their catalyst. Even now, they ran from it, no matter if they were pretending not to.

“I’m thinking we could take your brother out one day,” Zinnia was saying, a few steps away from Olivier, just in case. In the eyes of everyone, they needed to be professional-looking. “He could use some time off. They overwork him.”

“You want him to third-wheel?”

“He’s your brother, he’s not a third-wheel.”

“I don’t think he has time to spare, least of all if the purpose of said time is to spend it with us.”

“We’re a family. Spending time together is something we should strive for. He lives with us, Olivier, for god’s sake.”

Olivier rolled her eyes.

“So what do you propose? That we just ask him to come with us on one of these walks? Should we take him out for lunch as if he was a teenager without income of his own?”

“Actually, having lunch somewhere would be rather nice. Or dinner. Remember that restaurant we saw the other day? The one that resembled a medieval pub?”

“The Prancing Pony?” Olivier said, unable to believe it. “You want to go have lunch in a place that probably only serves two different courses and stale beer?”

“It has ambiance,” Zinnia defended it. “And Alex would like the decorations.”

“If we have to bring him anywhere, please let’s do it somewhere a little bit more prestigious than that.”

“You’d fit right in in The Prancing Pony and so would he. You know this as much as I do…”

“What I know is—”

But Olivier never finished the phrase. She knew this part of town. She had known it well once. Her hand on the worn walls of the houses, all stacked next to each other, the narrow space between them a shaky straight line that eventually grew and grew until it became a proper street instead of an alley.
Zinnia noticed, as she noticed everything. Olivier was an open book once one knew how to read her. And the way her eyes had frozen in no point in particular, her face suddenly flushed, and her expression had softened, Zinnia knew something was up.

“What? What did you see?”

Olivier didn’t react at first. She had had the breath struck out of her chest. It had been so many years, so many changes had taken place in her life, and yet this place could still do this to her.

“It’s … the streets that lead to Ianthe’s house.”

The streets she had once walked, hand-in-hand with someone else. The streets that had made her heart race, because she knew that once she got to her destination, she would be home. How long had it been since Olivier had had a home in Central? How long since she’d felt she could be herself there? Now, she was being herself somewhere else, in the arms of someone else. And yet … her heart, in bits and pieces, still moved like a magnet towards the narrow passage.

“And why are you standing there like you just saw a ghost? You’re not going to go reminisce?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re dying to?”

Olivier pierced her eyes with her own.

“I have absolutely no need to.”

“So you’re telling me that in fifteen years you have absolutely not developed the slightest of curiosities for what happened to her after you left,” Zinnia said calmly. “Am I getting it right?”

Olivier glared at her.

“It’s been a long time. Things have changed.”

“So I’m right, you’re just scared.”

“What on earth would I be scared of?”

“Finding her,” Zinnia said, and as soon as Olivier heard it she knew it was right. “Confronting your past.”

“I’m not scared of anything.”

“Sure, you’re not,” Zinnia teased. She approached her subtly enough that anyone watching wouldn’t have been able to misinterpret but and yet firmly enough that Olivier knew the power she had in that moment over her. “So, I’m just going to get myself something to drink. I will be right back.”

And the implications of that were clear, she was creating an opening for Olivier. Because, otherwise, in her company Olivier would turn back and fixate her mind on more important things than a girl she’d once loved. Who knew if she still lived here? Who knew if she still hated Olivier?

There was only one way to find out, one way and one choice. If she wanted to know, if she’d ever asked herself in the middle of the night after a long shift what future had taken place for Ianthe, then Olivier would stop just standing there.

And she had wondered, for so many months. She’d had so many questions, so many things she
hadn’t felt she was entitled to say after what she’d done. Perhaps now it was that moment in which she got to tell the truth.

*I left you because I loved you, because where I was going I couldn’t allow you to come. Because it was war, and you were peace incarnate, and I would have never forgiven myself for having any part to play in the death of that peace.*

It wouldn’t even take that long to say, if Ianthe was willing to listen for that long. It wouldn’t even take that big of an emotional toll, it wasn’t anything that Olivier hadn’t spent days thinking about.

It was the truth, and for once she would say it. She would mean it.

Decidedly, she took the first step forward.

It was like stepping into the world and what it had been like fifteen years ago. Olivier would get right out of training and get lost in these streets, trying to find somewhere quiet without loud soldiers being bashful so she could rest in peace, sometimes only ever sitting by a corner and watching cats and birds scutter by. Until one day, a human had stepped into the little game, wearing a paper flower the color of milk in her hair, and they had looked into each other’s eyes in the distance. Only ever an acknowledgement that day, a touch that said ‘I am here, who are you? Do you want to be here with me?’. And back then Olivier had been so good at playing that game, so good at acting like emotions didn’t matter. It had been easy, really. Ianthe had approached, tiny and yet more captivating than Olivier could have foreseen from just one glance, and her voice would have been able to keep the thunder and lightning captive within her throat, so commanding it was. And yet so gentle.

Ianthe had sat with her in the shade of a building. They had asked the right questions and they had dared answer them as the smell of a nearby bakery seeped into the very air they breathed. Every spoken recollection of their stories was a step closer to something they still couldn’t name, a tentative brush of their hands against each other’s forearm.

*I am here,* their fingers said as they began to tread lightly on the surface of each other’s skin, still ever-faltering in case these advances were not welcome.

But if neither were moving away, neither wanted to.

Olivier, ever bolder, used to much rougher touches in the academy, led the way at first. The first time her hands fully wrapped around Ianthe’s shoulders, they seemed to ask the very same question her lips had out loud: *who are you?*

*Who are you, that in a glance and a sentence have managed to render me speechless, when words are part of my power, my strength, my skill?*

Touch gave way to touch that day. It was quiet around the neighborhood, the houses’ windows were closed and shaded by curtains, as if time itself had stopped to give them a taste of the new season that was still to come, and they didn’t care. Touch gave way to touch in not caring.

In that very same corner, hidden from the world as Olivier had initially wanted to be, she had ceased to be a secret for Amestris. She had ceased to be unfindable in a city where everything had to be accounted for, and a girl from a lower-class neighborhood had been the one to properly find her and keep her visible.

When they finally kissed, tentative no more, they asked another question without speaking. *Do you want to be here with me?* And in the removal of parts of their clothing and the way their eyes met, like lovers reunited after a long parting, they answered it.
Now, Olivier absentmindedly brushed the surface of the wall where she had once planned to spend her time quietly and instead had crossed paths with a hurricane, and she walked on.

These streets crawled with her memories, livelier in the flesh than in her head, and much more dangerous. And yet she walked past them all—through them all, as if they were mist and fog, nothing more. Their humidity reached her, but it didn’t soak into her bones.

They had ambled here, once upon a time. They had been young and careless, half-naked in a public street. They had met time and time again, managed to get a sense of each other.

And then there was the house.

If Olivier closed her eyes right now, she could feel it around her. The first real home she’d known. Warm and beautifully scented, small but cozy, and with that garden that from day one had been theirs, just theirs.

“My parents only ever set foot in it to trim the grass and water the flowers,” Ianthe had told her once. It’s ours, her eyes had said. Just like her room had been theirs, so many many times over the months, in their quietness and in their hurry.

And now Olivier was so close to tasting a shadow of that dream, once her reality. Her feet moved more quickly, covered more ground with each stride, her heart rapidly beating inside her ribcage, each heartbeat a murmur that urged her to run.

When she turned this corner, it would be there, waiting. Almost as if no time had passed at all, almost as if Ianthe was still there, waiting by the door, sporting that maddening smirk. Almost as if Olivier had never left.

And what would she say, when she turned the corner? How could she ever muster up the courage to ring the doorbell? How could she ever apologize?

The uncertainty didn’t stop her, it hurried her.

When she turned this corner—
—she would be nineteen again—
—nothing would have changed—
—Ianthe would be waiting—

Always waiting. Olivier had always been waiting, had put her heart on pause. Their story hadn’t finished, it had just been frozen. Now the sun shone on them again. Now, Olivier had a chance to explain herself, to start all over. To resume this.

Never like before, never as it once had taken up the whole of her life, but there would be something there that Olivier had lived without for fifteen—now, almost sixteen—years: forgiveness.

When she turned the corner, Olivier almost run to the house. It was still standing, stone upon stone, a cottage turned urban. A thousand images flooded her brain, images of herself in a younger light, in younger days, less rough around the eyes. A child, not a woman.

Olivier walked into herself as she walked towards the house and she took what seemed to be her first full breath since she’d been nineteen. The house remained, her memories were intact. Her life and Ianthe remained intermingled in a moment in the past, right before her eyes. Whatever parts of her
innocence were left, they remained here.

More slowly now, Olivier climbed up the few steps to the entrance of the house. Grass had overgrown between the cracks of the stone and the first bugs of spring crawled among it, a sight that came into contrast with a pile of scattered mail that covered the spot where Olivier remembered had sat a doormat.

The wood of the door was a little chipped and worn after so many years. Olivier wondered why it hadn’t been repainted, although it certainly did add to the general feeling of the whole house. Sometimes, when she’d come here at night to sit on the stone steps under the sky, she remembered thinking it had looked like a sight out of a dark fairytale.

She almost smiled now, imagining that a witch opened the door, demanding to know who she was and what she was doing there. Wouldn’t it have been wondrous, to have Olivier step away from her reality into a fairytale where her sword and skill could defeat the villains?

Instead, she crouched by the pile of letters and took one at random. Her own handwriting pierced her eyes. *Ah, so the letter did reach its destination.* She couldn’t help but wonder if the rest of the letters were also from spurned lovers of Ianthe’s, only ever deserving the treatment of being tossed outside under rain and wind both.

It did not strike her as a weird thing. She did not check the mailbox either. She just stood there, her own letter in hand, and thought to herself that she should quickly find the courage to say what she hadn’t written on it.

How could she learn to say she was sorry in a minute? How could she manage to speak truth, and not the usual excuses she put up for herself to believe? *I left because I loved you too much to let you die in my war.*

Would Olivier even be able to have a proper conversation with whoever opened this door? Would Ianthe’s parents recognize her as the woman who had once visited this house or the woman who had left their daughter without a proper goodbye? *I left because I wasn’t brave enough to let you come with me.*

*I’m sorry,* Olivier thought now, for it was very possible she might never be able to say it out loud. She’d thought then that there was no other way but to leave the way she had, with a bitter lie in her mouth and grief in her heart, if that meant Ianthe would be safe. But couldn’t she have stayed in Central too, found work somewhere away from the military that wanted her north where she wouldn’t be a bother, and made a life with Ianthe? No war, no familial struggles, just a botanist and an ex-soldier. What would she have been, she wondered, if she’d left the military? If she’d married that botanist under the magnolia tree in the garden she was so close to standing next to now.

Perhaps, if she knocked on this door, barely the bright red it once was, she would find out.

She set her knuckles against her, her fingers shaking slightly, and took a deep breath. But from the sheer pressure of her hand on the wood, the door opened with a creak that lasted eternally and almost made Olivier’s heart leap into her mouth.

Then, that speeding heart fell with the realization of what this meant.

*No one’s home,* she thought. *No one’s been home in a long, long time.*

Perhaps a day after Olivier had left Central, perhaps a year. She would never know. The house was abandoned. She felt it in her bones the way she hadn’t before, the same way she’d harbored hope to
find a family living here.

And even so, she stepped in, an intruder where she’d once had been a guest. Memories oozed out of the wallpaper, intricate and so distinctly Xingese it made Olivier’s heart shake with its reds and golds and blacks and whites, but nothing on those walls came to life. Nobody opened any door to the rooms and walked out with a smile to welcome her back. The deserted nature of the house could not be denied. There were more ghosts here than memories.

Olivier entered every room, checked every corner. This was where all her lost hope had gathered for the past weeks, in a house in Central that hadn’t seen human life in years. And no matter how hard she looked, how much she hoped, no life sprouted from behind a mantelpiece, a bed sheet, a towel.

There was no life in this house.

She went last to the room she knew best. Ianthe’s room. Once covered in plants and greens and violets, as colorful as it was alive, the dust and abandon stared Olivier in the eye, defying her to remember. And she did. She’d had the privilege of seeping life out of this house once. Where was it now? Where had they gone?

Ianthe’s plants remained on the shelves, brown and grey, stems curved downwards. No one had been able to water them.

After that, Olivier stepped out to the garden. The grass thrived as it had always done, and so did the magnolia tree. The sun filtered, shining and new, through its light pink leaves and left beautiful shadows on it. Olivier stood beneath it, some of the branches coiling around her head, and closed her eyes.

She took one deep breath. So many things were gone from this place, but she still felt at peace here. If Ianthe had still been there, perhaps it wouldn’t have been that farfetched to think Olivier would have been able to say what she’d come here to.

I shouldn’t have left like that, I shouldn’t have done that to you.

I loved you then, I love you now.

I’m sorry.

She opened her eyes again to the sight of the ivy climbing up the exterior wall of the house. It, too, seemed to be alive, enduring the passage of time and the harshness of the winter. The way it ascended, Olivier knew there would be no tearing it away from the stone it had interwoven itself into. It was to remain there forever until the last day it saw sunlight. Some things always were meant to last. Some things always would, despite convention and expectations.

For a fleeting moment, Olivier almost wished upon that ivy. Almost wished she could be that ivy, the ivy on the wall that survives the winter.

Winter had almost ended, spring was coming. But not for her. Olivier’s true winter, relentless and invincible, was coming with spring. And she would not survive it. That was why she was here, to make sure a part of her always would: perhaps not in the plants in Ianthe’s room, but perhaps in this magnolia tree, this grass, this ivy.

This memory of that photograph taken right here, Ianthe by her side, her parents smiling behind the camera.

For the first time in a long time, Olivier spoke.
“You were right, I’m afraid,” she said to an Ianthe that would never hear it. “You were always right. Nothing I ever did was enough to protect our past together.”

Shards of it remained in this garden, in the shadows of the house. But the bulk of it had been taken away, and Olivier would never have any way to know where. It would always lie right outside her reach. And it would always wait for her there.

Olivier smiled placidly to herself. How ironic. A past that lived and died in the same breath within her, forever waiting where she could never go. Fitting for her history with this place, with her history with Ianthe.

Olivier had left north making Ianthe think their story had been a ruse so Ianthe wouldn’t follow her there, so she wouldn’t perish in the war with her. And, for fifteen years, Olivier hadn’t ever known if she had managed to keep Ianthe as safe as she’d meant to. Now, being here, it looked like perhaps Olivier had gifted Ianthe with a future, after all.

For someone who was meant to only have left for a while, Zinnia sure did hurry. She knew that it would take Olivier some time to visit that house and that upon seeing Zinnia wasn’t there, she’d just go home. So there was no reason to run through the streets of Central like she was being chased, but she still wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

It didn’t please her at all to be doing this. It went against what she believed relationships were built on. It meant going behind someone’s back out of principles. And it felt like betrayal more than anything else.

But she still had to do it, or else she’d never get to do anything at all. All’s fair in love and war, the saying goes. This was both.

She didn’t have to ask around more than once when she’d finally arrived at Central Command. Mustang was well known, and every last man here knew where to find him during working hours. She had to talk to Lieutenant Hawkeye first, since he seemed to be busy, and she had her sit down in the corridor while she talked to him, told him he had a visitor. She introduced herself to her as General Armstrong’s adjutant, hoping it should be enough. Olivier had definitely introduced her to her superiors and colleagues like that before, so it should work.

She exhaled in relief when Hawkeye had her walk in and closed the door once she had, leaving her alone with Mustang. He was sitting at his desk, hands arranging some papers he had there, but his eyes fixed on her the minute she was in.

“Ah,” he said. “Miss … Erwin? Is it? Take a seat!”

She did, careful of his apparent enthusiasm. She’d seen him around a few times in the mansion, had listened to a few conversations he’d had with Olivier. She had an idea of what hid beneath the mildly content mask of arrogance.

“So, Miss Erwin,” he continued, joining his fingers on the table. “What does the general want that she can’t ask me personally?”

Zinnia crossed her legs the way Olivier did and cocked her head.

“Oh, I’m not here on behalf of Olivier,” she said. She figured he was safe to use her first name around, since he’d already seen. Why Olivier had allowed it, Zinnia would never understand, but she trusted her judgment. If Olivier trusted Mustang with her secrets so much that she would ask him to keep Zinnia away from the city, then Zinnia could afford to be careless.
Mustang cleared his throat. “Then what can I ever do for you?”

“I came here for me,” Zinnia said clearly, making eye contact. “I know what she asked you to do. I’m here to ask you not to do it.”

Mustang smiled at her like she was a child in the wrong.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said slowly, as it to make it truer than way.

“Oh, I think you do,” Zinnia teased. “Where is she going to send me?”

Mustang held her gaze for a few seconds, trying to get a measure of her. She’d seen him in action, all he’d ever seen of her was a loyal adjutant staying on the side of things and working her magic on Olivier because she clearly was not just an adjutant to her.

However much he looked, he could never see past his impressions of her. And he would be wrong in having them.

In the end, when she didn’t blink in some time, he gave up.

“You shouldn’t get involved in this.” His tone was sincere, but Zinnia still didn’t trust it. “It’s for your own good. General Armstrong is doing her duty.”

Zinnia moved her chair closer to his table and leaned towards him.

“Listen, colonel, I’ve been living in Briggs for these past couple of months. I know what it’s like, I know about secrets. And I know this is big. Bigger than anything else before, and this country was built on warfare. So... just tell me what she’s planning so I can get out in time and go make myself useful.”

She was making herself useful, still leaving in the mornings to try and talk people into abandoning the city, trusting her uniform. Only last week, she had been believed because there were rumors circulating the city already, and some family had assured her they were going to spread this around even more and leave soon. It had been her first and perhaps her only victory, but she needed to stay in Central to continue helping those she could.

“And what will you do? I have explicit orders not to let civilians in on this.”

“We’re already in on this. As victims, as potential deaths on your spotless career.”

Mustang snorted, a dark expression coming on his face. “It’s far from spotless.”

“It’ll be drenched in blood if you don’t let me help. There’s people in the city who need to evacuate, well before chaos strikes. Someone has to warn them and that’s what I’m doing.”

Mustang sighed.

“Fine. But if she finds out, I am not taking the blame.”

“I’ll take her wrath for you, colonel, don’t worry.” Her eyes pierced his with unyielding firmness. “Just tell me.”

He paused for a second, still wondering if he was doing the right thing. He, too, must have an important code of honor to adhere to if he was finally telling her, betraying Olivier in her favor. Perhaps he, too, thought it was wrong to send Zinnia away. Although, if he truly did, then he wouldn’t have helped Olivier in the first place, would he?
His exhale was in defeat.

“An abandoned property,” he said, “far away from the city center. It’s close to the border with the West Area, she knows what’s she’s doing.”

“When is she sending me there?”

“She has leave to one day before the equinox.”

Zinnia sat back on her chair and looked him in the eye.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me…” he said.

As she stood up to leave, her business concluded here, he spoke again:

“If she wants to keep you safe, perhaps you should reflect on why you’re so intent on defying her.”

Zinnia spun slowly on her heels and fixed her eyes on his.

“Because I’m not the only one who deserves to be safe. Good day, Mustang.”

Chapter End Notes

Prussian blue apparently is a shade of blue, and I could not resist the reference.

Also, I rewatched episode 46 for this chapter, and I noticed something I hadn’t on my first time watching: Olivier really does say “it’s not like [the mansion] can fit inside my casket”, I wish I had made that up for angst but nope, it’s canon. And, of course, I screamed at my computer when she said that because HOW DARE SHE ASSUME SHE IS GOING TO DIE (how dare you leave me)

The Prancing Pony is the pub in Lord of the Rings where Frodo is supposed to meet Gandalf after he's left The Shire. Back when I was writing this chapter (March 2019), I had recently gotten into LOTR again, so that’s why xD

And ‘now the sun shone on them again’ is almost word-for word the line Loki says to Thor in Avengers Endgame: “The sun will shine on us again.”
Westward, eastward

Chapter Notes

Here it is, the beginning of the end! 😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“What do we do?”

That, without a doubt, that been the question to plague them all week, since the fort had been rung with the news that King Bradley had been travelling to East Command for a few days, where a trap had been set to delay him until the Promised Day was over. It was the sign they’d been waiting for since they had been in touch with the Curtis woman. The fall of power that would allow them to finally get into action.

But Buccaneer had spoken of action for so long, in such vague terms, that when the moment had come, all his resolve had faded from view. What could Briggs possibly do in the middle of a war with Drachma, miles and miles away from Central?

‘What do we do’ was the question that didn’t let either Buccaneer or Miles enjoy their coffee even a few hours after the news had reached them.

The coffee machine sat at the table of the lounge, steaming curls of white up into the ceiling. A few men were sitting there, making time, resting from their patrols. They had just been relieved of their duties by the next shift, on top of the wall with the cannons. The silence at Buccaneer’s question spread and spread, and as much as they all would have liked to answer, none had the ability to.

“What do we do?” Buccaneer repeated. “Olivier is still there, probably getting herself involved up to her waist.” It was worse than that and Buccaneer knew. It had been a while since her last call, which could mean an awful lot of unpleasant things, and he took it to mean she was already tangled up in everything. “And she’s alone against them all. When war starts down there, she’ll be at the center of it. Alone.”

“I know we’re supposed to think of her first and foremost,” a petite voice said. “She’s our boss, after all. But … I can’t stop thinking about—about the children. All those children in Central that won’t know to run because this was always such a big secret.”

It had only been last week that Buccaneer and Miles had made the difficult decision of sharing the news with everyone. That Central had something wicked planned for the first day of spring and that it would do more than just affect the Central Area. But this was the first time there was a discussion about what to do about it.

“How many civilians in that city, Buc?” someone else asked.

“A few million,” Buccaneer answered, rubbing his hand against his automail. “It’s clear we can’t let them die either.”

“The only way to help any of those people, including Olivier, is to leave for Central City and fight with them,” Miles said, ever the solemn voice of reason. But he didn’t say it as an idea to throw on
the table. On the contrary, he had always been opposed to going down there without Olivier’s orders. “And we can’t do that with Drachma still on our backs.”

Someone chuckled lifelessly.

“Then what?” Buccaneer pressed on. “We just … wait? Sit here like cowards, because without orders we’re betraying her? She doesn’t want us there in case we die, not because she doesn’t need us.”

Miles sighed.

“If we leave,” he tried to rephrase it. “Drachma would win. We’ve been fighting this war for far too long to give up on it.”

The soldiers began to mumble among themselves. They were opinionated men who could see both sides of the discussion. Leaving meant being loyal to Olivier and to their soldier hearts, but leaving also implied losing an ancient war and losing the fort.

“All Drachma wants is the north back,” Austin said firmly. “If we go, that’s all they will take. They will settle another border and move on. But if we fight this, wait it all out, then I fear it might be too late for all of us. There will be no fort to last a siege in, no Central to go, no country. Just the alchemy that unbound it all.”

“So, in the end, this choice is about where to die, isn’t it?” another one of the soldiers said.

Buccaneer actually stood up from his chair.

“We are Briggs men. What is death but a given?” he said loudly. “It matters not where we die or even if dying is a prospect at all. We’re soldiers, damn it! We save nations, we keep people safe, not fight a stupid war with a thirsty country that only has them and us as casualties.”

“Mostly them…” someone mumbled under their breaths.

“Maybe we’ll die in Central,” Buccaneer continued. “Maybe not. But we will have honored our pledges anyway. We will have tried to do the right thing. If we die, we die knowing that. If we live, we will have saved the nation. And,” He chuckled loudly, “if Drachma has the balls to invade our land with us gone, we will kick their asses back into their sorry excuse of a country.”

The little crowd at the lounge cheered on, except for Miles. Miles watched sourly as more people joined in on Buccaneer’s optimistic take on it. Leaving the fort meant being defeated to go to another war they might not win, it was not the Briggs way. It was, truth be told, suicide. But, and he must agree with Buccaneer on this, it was the honorable thing to do and what all good men at Briggs would vote for.

Long gone were the days when they could all stay home, warming up near a cup of coffee and gossiping about new winter romances and complaining about the weather changes. That life had been lost months ago, then why did Miles keep trying to cling to it? What would he lose if he let go of it that he hadn’t thought lost already?

Buccaneer chose that moment to climb atop a table, his head almost touching the ceiling, and raised his automail arm.

“Only the strong survive,” he almost shouted. “And we’re the strongest of all!”

Miles almost smiled. Olivier was lost, his pleasant soldier life was, too. But Buccaneer remained …
and Buccaneer, he would never lose. There was not a more durable man in the world, no one with his vision, no one with his valor. He would lead them. And it was time for Miles to step back and offer all that leadership to him and him alone. It was long overdue.

The cheers continued and in the end they all convened, under Buccaneer’s command, to settle this with a vote when they gathered up the whole fort. This needed to reach them all, be on the shoulders of each and every person in the fort, including the doctor. It wasn’t a choice to make lightly, in spite of Buccaneer’s enthusiasm, and it deserved to be taken individually first. The few would decide the fate of the many.

With the first choruses of war since Drachma had attacked lifting their spirits, Briggs reunited in one of the lower levels and made the hard decision to lose the war in favor of honoring their condition as soldiers and saving those who would have no one else to save them.

“Besides,” Buccaneer said, “there is no way Olivier has amassed a resistance big enough to stop Central. And wouldn’t they love to meet their pals from Briggs in open combat at a moment like this, when they already think they’ve won?”

“You sure this is a good idea?” Zinnia said, leaning on the door frame. March had dawned warm as May, just like last year, and Zinnia had ditched her usual uniform for her old dresses. It wasn’t her only reason to wear them, though.

“I won’t be needed here until the 21st,” Olivier said, busy packing her last. “We might as well spend our last days somewhere nice, alone.” She emphasized the word.

Alex had taken to invading their space a little too much lately, unaware that they were indeed trying to make the most out of it when he wasn’t around. On one occasion, he had even pulled a Mustang: walked in on them getting a little hot and heavy and acted like nothing of importance was happening. It drove Olivier mad to have to behave like a proper lady in his presence if Zinnia was there too.

Ever since March had caught up with them, Olivier’s … hunger had grown, not only in intensity but also in languidness. She grew slow and passionate and would linger on Zinnia’s skin far longer than she’d used to. Zinnia thought that explained why she wanted the two of them to go away, so she would have plenty of room and privacy to linger.

But with the Promised Day just around the corner, was it wise?

Zinnia almost giggled.

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Ever since March had caught up with them, Olivier’s … hunger had grown, not only in intensity but also in languidness. She grew slow and passionate and would linger on Zinnia’s skin far longer than she’d used to. Zinnia thought that explained why she wanted the two of them to go away, so she would have plenty of room and privacy to linger.

But with the Promised Day just around the corner, was it wise?

Zinnia almost giggled.

“You sure this is a good idea?” Zinnia said, leaning on the door frame. March had dawned warm as May, just like last year, and Zinnia had ditched her usual uniform for her old dresses. It wasn’t her only reason to wear them, though.

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Zinnia almost giggled.
Zinnia kneaded Olivier’s upper back with her forehead.

“This heat?”

“The weather heat,” Olivier corrected. “Other things that involve heat do not bother me as much.”

“Good to know,” Zinnia said, quickly getting to undo the first button on Olivier’s uniform. There was no talking her into swapping it for spring clothes when she wasn’t at work, she insisted on wearing it as a reminder of who she was and what she was meant to do. But it was thick and had long-sleeves, and it made Central’s warm temperatures less bearable.

“What are you doing?” Olivier asked calmly. “Alex is downstairs.”

“Downstairs is a long way away,” Zinnia said, working her way up to the last buttons near Olivier’s neck. “Besides, I don’t know if I want to wait however long the car ride lasts.”

“I…” Olivier started, clearly meaning to say something calmly and poisedly, the only one who was in her right mind in this situation. Instead, she spun around in Zinnia’s arms and faced her, cheeks already flushed, heart already pounding. “I know I don’t.”

“Maybe we should shut the door…” Zinnia giggled, trying to lean back and get it, but Olivier held her closer.

“Don’t. Downstairs is a long way away.”

Her hands quickly found the hem of Zinnia’s dress and pushed it upwards, her fingers exploring the curve of Zinnia’s upper thigh and earning her a soft gasp in return.

“If you keep that up,” Zinnia said in as much of a dignified voice as she could muster, “Alex will hear us.”

“Keep quiet, then,” Olivier murmured against Zinnia’s collarbone. She had to really bend forwards for this, punishing her entire back, but it was worth it. Zinnia almost always shut up when she touched her neck, either because there was too much sensitivity there to really juggle feeling and talking or because she liked to fully focus on Olivier’s touch.

And, for Zinnia, it was worth shutting up. Worth delaying their departure on that honeymoon destination somewhere cold where Olivier wouldn’t feel an absurd need to take clothes off, which would be an incredible incentive for Zinnia to begin taking them off. Maybe … just maybe … Olivier’s hunger had now been passed on to her—through her skin.

“Olivier—” Alex’s voice came from the stairs.

“Shit!” Olivier hissed, letting go of Zinnia only reluctantly as she smoothed out her dress. “What do you want now?”

“Were you not going on a trip?” he said as he arrived in the room where they were.

“We are,” she said.

“You will miss your train!”

“There is no train, Alex!” she snapped. “We’re taking the car.”

“We’re taking the car?” Zinnia asked.
“Does anyone here actually remember that we can’t be seen?” Olivier said in exasperation. “If it were up to you…”

“They would have used me against you already,” Zinnia recited from memory, exhaling. “Honestly, it’s not like you couldn’t have told me we were taking the car.”

Olivier stepped closer to her again, so close Zinnia almost thought for a second they were going to … resume what they had interrupted in front of Alex.

“Zinnia,” Olivier enunciated right in front of her face, “we are taking the car.”

Alex let out a big chuckle, and Zinnia had to bite her lip not to laugh, too. Sometimes this family overpowered them all. It drove Olivier to extremes, both good and bad, and it entertained her brother and girlfriend so much. Nothing bad could ever come out of living together, the three of them in this deserted house, even if Alex was around a little too much. He was family.

The word was finally starting to make sense for the three of them, but they still didn’t know.

“Now, Alex,” Olivier said, looking at her brother without moving, just out of the corner of her eye. “Shoo.”

“She treats me as if I was a mosquito!” he complained as he left her alone.

“Always buzzing around, making noise, getting his nose where it doesn’t belong.” She made sure to speak loudly so he would hear as Zinnia put a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggling. “I wonder how I haven’t come up with the comparison in your place!”

“Because you’re in love. And your little flower has replaced your brains with goo!” came the reply from downstairs already.

Olivier let out a puff of air.

“I can’t stand him.”

Zinnia was grinning widely, even redder in the face than before, but now it was a different kind of blush.

“You love him,” she said, putting both of her arms around Olivier’s shoulders. “He’s right, too. Your brains are nothing but goo if you’re willing to spend the last few days before chaos somewhere secluded with me.”

Olivier didn’t wait half a moment, she lunged forward and devoured the flower girl’s mouth with as much gentility as she could allow through her veins.

“Wait till you’ve seen it, then we can talk about ‘secluded’,” she muttered between hungry, desperate kisses. They were brief as a heartbeat and strong as a heart itself, an intermittent reminder to let go but to delve deep before they did so.

She pushed Zinnia back against the bed, but it didn’t have the effect she’d desired. Zinnia fell, indeed, but she did so on her ass, sitting right on top of Olivier’s poorly shut suitcase.

“Are you going to make me wait much longer to see it?” Zinnia said, inches away from Olivier’s mouth, possibly her favorite place in the world so far, although if she was being taken somewhere nice, she might change her mind.
Olivier rested both hands on Zinnia’s thighs and threw her hair to one side.

“Hop off and let me get the suitcase,” she only said.

Zinnia did with a smirk, kissing Olivier’s cheeks as she got back on the floor.

*The nerve...* Olivier thought with a smirk of her own as she watched her smooth out her dress again, like nothing had been about to happen. Zinnia was going to be the death of her. Even worse, she wasn’t—but Olivier urgently wanted her to be. It would be the only death she would accept willingly, the only death she wouldn’t require meeting while she still fought. She would kneel before Zinnia, she would kneel clothed and yet bare, and Zinnia would close her eyes forever.

If only.

If only this was the winter honeymoon Olivier was pretending it was.

If only it wasn’t the signature that approves an execution.

If only.

Olivier drove for hours, with Zinnia as her companion in the front seat. It felt good to be behind the wheel after so long. At first, her whole body had just sat there, unsure if it remembered how to handle a car, but slowly she had relaxed and the miles had just flown past her. They were halfway there, crossing the border with the West Area, when the landscape began to change slightly, getting browner and grayer where Central was an eternal prairie of flowers and greens. This, though, this looked so much more like home that Olivier rolled down her window to smell the fading winter.

She could almost lie to herself and make it home for a few seconds. Where they were going, it was an old military property in the heart of the western mountains, nothing as impressive as Briggs, but after so long without the views of the northern valleys, each tree and rock frozen after a cold night, Olivier could make that work.

The only thing that stood at attention was that this part of the country was much wetter than Briggs. Up north, it snowed, hardly ever rained at all, and it was a dry snow.

Perhaps, if Olivier was lucky, she would get to see snow before they got to their destination. Just a few snowflakes against the windshield and she would be happy. But the weather was good, as it had been for days. One more year, spring had arrived early in fact if not in truth.

The sun was setting right in the horizon, spiked by mountains the color of soil that were much smaller and rounder that the northern ones, when Olivier finally took a turn on a gravel road past hills of greens and browns towards a house that stood in the middle of nowhere, a sole survivor.

“Is this property of your family?” Zinnia asked excitedly as soon as she saw it.

Olivier smiled tensely and lied, said that it was a summer home they never went to because it was too far away from the city and there was nothing to do. To be honest, this house was a fair distance away from anything, a tranquil idyll precisely meant to escape the city life and the noise that came with it. It was why Olivier had chosen it, because there would be no running away anywhere at all. Only the mountains were around them.

Almost home.
She parked by the entrance of the impressive four-story building and got out to the fresh air of the evening, taking a full deep breath of it, and opened the trunk to get the luggage, then helped Zinnia out.

“Holy mother of all that’s holy, this is beautiful.”

“And it’s all ours,” Olivier said, but she was nervous, it didn’t come off as seductively as it should have. She acted normally as they walked towards the door, which opened to a wide room with couches big and luxurious enough that in normal circumstances not even Olivier might have been able to afford. A military property … for the high ranks, very much used to indulgence.

Immediately, Zinnia huddled both arms close to her chest.

“It’s cold.”

“What did you expect?” Olivier said, managing a slightly cruel laugh. She put the suitcase on the floor and pushed it closer to Zinnia. “Take this upstairs, I’ll try to get the fire going.”

“Upstairs, where?”

“I don’t know, pick the room that you like most,” Olivier said, faking a smile.

She made to walk for the chimney hole, but as soon as she saw Zinnia going upstairs, she promptly headed back to the car, her pace brisk. It was done. It was done and there was no backing away now. Now she only had to make it to the car before Zinnia came back down and saw. Olivier didn’t think her heart could take it if Zinnia saw.

She was already getting into the car when she heard Zinnia’s voice calling her name. It wasn’t long before Zinnia gasped so loudly Olivier heard. Then, she came right out of the door like Olivier had never seen her: angry, truly angry.

She had seen. And what was worse, she knew. She knew…

Olivier tried to get the car started, but her hands were shaking, and Zinnia was faster. She walked over there, opened the door to Olivier’s seat without scruples, and dragged her out. Olivier let her.

“Explain yourself,” Zinnia said, buying time.

But there was no time to buy, Olivier needed to remind herself of that, she needed to remember that the pain going through her right now was necessary, was what would grant Zinnia’s safety in the long run.

“Let go of me,” she just commanded. And it might have sounded forceful enough, but her eyes were sad and there was no lying out of that situation.

Zinnia could have let go. Olivier prayed so she would and this was over easy, but Zinnia held on, her nails digging into Olivier’s clothes. Zinnia held on and then held on some more, her other hand on Olivier’s shoulder.

“I’m not letting go until you explain to me just why you’re leaving,” Zinnia almost screamed. She had tears in her eyes, the tears Olivier wished she could shed as well, but her eyes were blocked.

“I’m sorry,” she only said. “I have to go. You’ll be safer here than with me.”

Olivier tried to get off, but Zinnia insisted, rougher this time. And Olivier had to resort to the one
thing she had not used in all those months up north fighting in the gymnasium.

She used the Armstrong strength that she kept hidden deep within her, that separated her from the rest of her kin. She was the eldest Armstrong and the strongest, and this only a few people knew. Not Zinnia, not yet.

But she was about to.

“You can’t do this to me,” Zinnia kept saying, resisting. “You can’t leave me. I won’t leave you!”

Olivier pushed Zinnia away now, regretting it with all her heart and having to fight herself in order not to kneel by her side, cradle her silently and promise that this changed nothing when Zinnia hit the ground hard. Olivier was well-aware that it was changing everything, and yet she still did it.

“Someone will come for you,” Olivier said, impassive. In her mind, she was far away, standing in the face of the wind and watching the prairies from a mountain. “When everything is over, someone will come back for you.”

“I don’t want anyone to come back for me! I want to march into battle with you!”

And then Zinnia got back up from the ground, her big brown eyes full of rage and grief, and came at her, just like she had in those training sessions of the past. Olivier didn’t hold back this time, she dug her heels on the gravel, tensed her arms, and fought her like she never had before—with the full of her strength.

It didn’t last at all.

In a flash, Zinnia was on the carpeted floor of the mansion, defeated and betrayed and broken. And she watched Olivier stand menacing before her. She couldn’t possibly past see the betrayal, she couldn’t possibly see how Olivier’s eyes were full of tears.

“I love you,” Olivier said, her voice strained. She sniffed and said it again. “I love you. Please remember that.”

Zinnia was crying on the floor, but from anger or sadness, Olivier didn’t want to know. She tried to put that image away from her mind as she turned her back on Zinnia to leave, to finally leave, but it clung to the edges of her vision.

She shed a few tears on the way to the car, and as she opened the door, she turned around just a little and saw Zinnia hadn’t moved.

Her voice came to her. Olivier closed her eyes and wished whatever she was going to say was something beautiful, something that she would hold close to her heart during her last moments. But she knew how wishful that was.

Whatever Zinnia said, Olivier would have to treasure it. Her voice saying it, her tone, her pitch, the way her lips moved even in the distance. Her words. Olivier had always liked Zinnia’s words, written and spoken.

These would be the last she ever got to hear.

“How dare you leave me?” Zinnia said.

Zinnia remained where she was until Olivier’s car was not even a spot near the horizon, crying silently at first, then sobbing louder every time she realized anew that she was alone and that this
would soon be the last time she’d see Olivier. The last everything. The last goodbye, and it had been a fight.

She ran outside again, chasing a car that now she couldn’t even see. It pained her so much she had to hold her chest as she heaved onto the gravel, time and time again. And what was worse about how it hurt was that she understood why Olivier had done this. She had known it was coming, she had known and yet she had let it slip past her, well-wrapped in fantasies. But Mustang had said the day before the equinox, and that was still far away. Zinnia couldn’t have known, but she should have. She should have known better than to trust him.

She should have done much more than just believe him blindly, plan ahead for what his news had been and not what her reality could become. A reality of smeared clothes and scraped knees and a heart that was so deeply broken there would be no mending it. The war might as well just do with it what it pleased.

The war… She almost laughed, almost cackled. She would sit through the war, somewhere lost in the West Area, as men fought and fell. She would survive it. She would be forced to see the day that someone came back here to tell her Olivier was dead.

“How dare you leave me?” she yelled into the wind, punching the ground until her fists bled. “How dare you do this to me?”

Olivier was gone. Gone and lost. Every second, farther away. Every second, closer to war. And Zinnia was here, safe, alone. When all she had wanted to do was fall by Olivier’s side, not have to put up with a world without the two of them together. That was a world she had no interest in, no matter who inherited it.

She had come south, back to the place where she’d been born. She had donned the uniform again, she had acted like a soldier. She had lied to people, confessed the truth to people, went behind people’s backs. She had worried and withered, but she had never given up. Hope had always had a place within her. Olivier had no right to take that away, to ditch her in an empty cold house and leave.

Olivier had no right to put her somewhere safe and march into hell itself when Zinnia wasn’t looking.

The crying didn’t last. Eventually, all tears run out and all there is left is emptiness, as vast as the circumference of the world and as endless as the universe where it spins. She did not get up for many minutes, no matter how cold the air coming from the mountains was.

She stopped crying, but she didn’t stop harboring anger. Olivier couldn’t just be allowed to get away with this. It was so unfair, so deeply unfair to leave Zinnia here to live when Olivier was so sure she would die. She was defying a fate Zinnia had already taken for granted, and Zinnia he would not have that.

When she did get up on her feet, slowly, the sky had turned dark, a shadow looming over the West Area. There was no sun left to remind her of the day she’d only just this morning hoped to have. The clouds moved sluggish and slow throughout the sky, pushed by a wind that hardly had any strength left.

It was a priceless sight against the dulled mountains and the house, but Zinnia did not notice it. She put one foot after the other until she was upstairs, a few closed rooms around her, and she did not stop until she had found a map in one of them.
If the wind wouldn’t propel her, she would propel herself. In a matter of days, Central would be host to the most terrible war that had ever begun and ended on their planet. And Zinnia had to get there to either die with Olivier or see a new day after having freed their country.

She spread the map on the living room table and sat close to it. She was certain the car had crossed the border into the West Area, she had seen the signs informing of it, and there was only one mountainous area this close to the border with Central. It was only a matter of finding a town near enough to the house that she could walk there, but it needed to be a town with connections to Central. A train, a car service, a herd of horses. Zinnia would take anything.

Anything to have her way, to prove Olivier was wrong in thinking she could pull these things off without consequences. Zinnia was almost thirty years old, she was a grown woman and she was tired. And if she was stubborn enough to want to fight and die in Central, so she would. Olivier was not one to try and take that away from her.

There were a few towns within her reach, but only one with a train line to Central. And it would take her at least four days to get there on foot. In winter, through the mountains, and without any food or shelter, just the strength of her legs and the thickness of her coat.

But Zinnia had survived the harshest of the many Amestrian winters. Alone in a deserted town, in a snowed-in valley, without proper weapons or any hunting experience. This would be a stroll.

Decidedly, she rolled the map again after having traced the route she would take into the mountains, and headed upstairs to the suitcase she’d left there.

She didn’t even haul it onto the bed, she just tore it open right where it was on the floor, got out the clothes that might shield her better from the morning and evening chill, and prepared a tiny improvised bag that would carry it all.

She tried luck in the kitchens to see if there was any food, but this house—on a closer look, duster than expected—was as deserted as Iver in the winters and harbored no sign of habitability. Just another sign that if she stayed, she’d be putting up with starvation as well as abandonment, unless Olivier had arranged for someone to bring her food at some point.

Next, sorely missing the knives which she had left behind at the mansion, Zinnia walked out of the house into the wilderness, heading north.

All of Briggs hid within the Armstrong mansion, enabled by Mustang’s men, readying the ammunition, their weapons, the tanks they had brought south with them. They were the pride and joy of Fort Briggs, a rarity of metal and wonder both that had finished Drachma off in the first days of their conflict and would soon aid the rebels get the senior staff out of Central Command.

There was no time to be lost in anything that wasn’t preparation. Every man on this fortress of a house had slept for the night after their arrival, cots on marble floors and long lines to use the bathrooms. It seemed really easy, then, to forget whose house this was.

Buccaneer had seen the pictures. Many blond kids inside those frames, smiley and well-clothed, and only one he knew better than he knew himself.

He only stared at it for a second, though. Picked it up to look at it, then put it back and moved forward, calling for Miles.
He and Miles, they led. They had always followed, only ever knowing how to step where someone else had, and now they had over two hundred men stepping right after them. And to him it came naturally, he only needed to set a decent precedent, be a decent man. The rest would come when it did.

They had waited a day. Now, the equinox was right upon them. Soon, the heart of the city would be crawling with death if they didn’t stop this.

Going upstairs, Buccaneer found Miles sitting on a bed inside a room with barely just the mattress, a desk, and a typewriter on it. He had the air of nostalgia, wishfully dreaming of either past or future before the final battle. Miles had never been one to waste time with such frilly platitudes, Buccaneer knew. But things had changed so much in the past few weeks to not be flexible enough to allow this. Miles had been working nonstop since he had returned to Briggs, a couple of minutes of rest before giving the order wouldn’t hurt anyone.

“Hey,” Buccaneer said softly, almost knocking on the door.

Miles looked up at him and said nothing.

“You ready?” Buccaneer said.

“I think this is her room,” Miles said in return.

He didn’t need to explain what ‘her’ meant.

“Oh yeah?”

“It smells like her.”

Buccaneer held himself back and refrained from making a joke. It wasn’t time for that. He had an entire fort’s worth of men downstairs, just lounging until he gave the order. Until they gave the order. Miles might have thought he was passing on the leadership position on to Buccaneer, but Buccaneer wouldn’t have it unless it was a shared position.

“We will cross paths with her today,” Buccaneer only said, sitting with him.

“You think?” Miles looked up at him.

“If I know anything—” Buccaneer smiled confidently. “—is that the woman will be out there in the front lines.”

“I’d like to think she’s kept herself safe,” Miles said, laughing a little. “But … that’s not who she is.”

“That’s not who we are either. We will keep her and everyone else safe.”

And, promptly, Buccaneer covered Miles’s hand with his own.

“I swear it to you, Miles. No harm will come to her while I live.”

Miles smiled softly at him, squeezed at his hand.

“I am looking forward to seeing what face she makes when she realizes we have come to her rescue.”

Buccaneer chuckled loudly.
“Well, I can assure you she won’t think kindly of it. But we will do it anyway.” They both nodded, staring into each other’s eyes a little too long. Then, Buccaneer took a deep breath. “It is time, old friend. The sun is up. It’s time for Briggs to march.”

Slowly, Miles got up from the bed and the two of them gathered the troops outside on the gardens. It was time. Despite the early hour, the sky was still a little too dark, the city too silent. Soon, the first screams would come. Soon, chaos would ensue. And Briggs would be the shield between chaos and citizen. Briggs would make a difference today in the world of southerners.

The sun was up, covered in an almost complete shadow, and the dimness of night slithered from sky to earth. Even from the windows of her train, Zinnia opened her weary eyes in time to see it rise in darkness. Night within day, day within night. Life within death, death within life—waiting, sneaking, looming. The world didn’t stand a chance against it, but the world did not know it yet.

Spring had finally come, eclipsed by an eternal winter.

And Zinnia had crawled and slithered through the last days of that winter, muddy and restless, until she had found this train that was now taking her into the heart of the nation. She had fought to see an end to everything. Anyone who knew this would have either tried to stop her or silently judged her crazy. And she must have been, because rage no longer fueled her, mere exhaustion had done the trick. She wanted to fall, but not alone. She wanted to fall alongside she who had given birth to that rage.

Grand Central received her, just like it had months ago—when the storm had still seemed to be far away, when Zinnia had had the ghost memory of snow and hail in every inch of her body and a hand to hold past all that.

She took the tramway from the station with the last remaining money she had, feet dragging on the sidewalk and clothes stained by the wasteland of the western ranges. The city moved around her, cars passing each other, people refusing to cross the streets when they should. And it was so normal, so routinely. Shouldn’t this whole place be in shreds already, with crowds running for their lives?

When Zinnia had pictured the end, she had seen flames and gunpowder, chaos and blood. Nothing like the wars up north, mostly silent except for the echoes of the cannons and cold, so very cold. The eclipse shone over Central, warm even if the sun behind it wasn’t complete today.

There was no war yet, just a city waiting to be destroyed by the hand of those who claimed to defend it.

Once she got off the tramway, Zinnia walked the remaining distance to the Armstrong property. So much walking, one would think each step blurred in her mind more than the last, but she remembered those four days of crossing past hills and mountains and houses alike to get here. All to get back to this house, look Olivier in the eye and tell her this was her choice, and she would die where she chose to, with whom she chose to, even if that whom was a traitor and a liar.

The gate to the gardens was open wide and there was not a soul to be found, but Zinnia went in anyway. Olivier knew how to hide in plain sight. She had to be here, preparing. Saying her goodbyes, pushing her brother away at the very last possible moment so he would be safe.

Today, Zinnia would jet that annoying little word as far away from her life as she could. ‘Safe’ was just another lie, an excuse people in power used to keep someone like Zinnia from being an active
participant in dangerous events.

But perhaps Olivier had no interest in ‘safe’ today. She wasn’t home. The house was empty and untidy, as if an entire battalion had ransacked it. There were unwashed sheets everywhere, china piled up in the sink, and no chair in the mansion had been pushed in under the table.

Zinnia wasted no time. If Olivier wasn’t here, she knew where she would be. Right at the core of everything, waiting in Central Command to kill or be killed once the big shots called it a war with the first deaths.

She only stopped by the bedroom to grab her knives and ran out to the streets.

She had to find Olivier before it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you paying attention, last chapter's notes contained a spoiler for this one ^^
The day must run its course. Nothing more, nothing less.

It was too much of a simple truth for Olivier to have trouble with it, so she decided she wouldn’t. Not when the news came that Mustang was attempting to flee the city with the Führer’s wife as his hostage; not when she was left alone, without access to new developments on Mustang’s side of things. Not even when a new gathering was announced to be held.

General Gardner and General Fox, two of the least conspicuous generals of this table, had been the first to get there. Because she was early to the meeting, on occasion of this day, she was forced to deal with them. And what an insufferable pair those two were.

One would think that what would come out of the arrival of spring would be Olivier finally getting rid of her poise, finally shedding the liar skin she had donned for the past months and baring her bear claws.

She tapped her fingers on the table, arms crossed, counting the minutes. As soon as there were news of Mustang, she would do it. She just had to wait a little more, drag it along just a little more. And then she would never have to again. There would be no going back.

“General Klemin was always an incompetent snob!” General Gardner was saying, retired from his seat to quietly observe the empty streets. The city still looked so very normal, it almost seemed as if nothing were happening, as if the world wasn’t about to end. Any minute now.

“He is detained fighting Mustang’s team—still!” he continued, shaking his head. “If it had been me out there, that bastard and his people would already be dead.”

Olivier showed a tense smile but said nothing.

“They’re attracting a good portion of our forces—” General Fox added from the table. Those two got on well, Olivier had observed. They finished each other’s sentences, found a certain camaraderie in killing and plotting that wasn’t as communal in other generals. She would enjoy revealing the truth to them, in a most gruesome way if she could. “—without killing a single man. Klemin should be fired after this.”

He shook his head disapprovingly, distantly. These men, they didn’t think Mustang a threat, not in the slightest. This attack was contained, a minor issue on a ravishingly beautiful and exciting day. They gossiped about it as two students might after a particularly interesting morning at school.

“I hear he gave the order to kill on sight, except for Mustang himself. I don’t know what he expects to find out, but that Mustang will not budge,” Gardner added. “Whoever he’s working with is already with him. Who could his word lead to?”

Me, you fools. Sitting right across from you, Olivier thought, getting impatient.
“Strategy does not only just fail General Klemin,” she finally spoke, calmly, trying to emulate their tones. “It is a sickness to be found in every soldier trained at Central Command.”

“I beg your pardon?” General Fix said.

“The men under your command,” she continued. “They are as incompetent as Klemin. Even more so, if you please. You might as well send in children.”

“I would greatly advise you to mind your tongue, Armstrong,” Gardner warned. “Those soldiers you speak of are defending your country today.”

“From an insignificant threat, if I’m to assume your words are true,” she said. “Or does Mustang’s scrawny team of four pose any danger to us?”

“We are in no danger,” Fox confirmed. “But the situation is, beyond doubt, reprehensible. Any other general would have handled it by now—”

“Are you not listening to me, Fox?” Olivier said, raising her voice slightly to speak over him. “Mustang hasn’t been apprehended yet because he excels at staging a kidnapping, but because your troops have never had to deal with any similar insurrection. What your men lack is proper experience, and the defense they are making has proven to be, if anything, laughable.”

“And what do you suggest?” Fox asked her, clearly disinterested in her word, as he and the others had always been. She was surprised he had not told her off for interrupting. Such was the stupidity in the brain of that man…

Perhaps, if she pushed it a little more, he would realize the situation was no longer in his hands.

“I have the experience your men lack,” she said confidently, even though it was a lie. Her times in command of Briggs had been peaceful, and she couldn’t say she had been privy to the general’s plan back during the war. But she had to try this. With the forces of Central under her, the battle could be more easily won. “I have seen real combat and trained soldiers under duress. This is something the battalion could benefit from.”

Both generals looked at each other and laughed loudly.

Olivier stood resolute, arms still crossed, ankle on her opposite knee. Even if she didn’t succeed in doing anything, she would buy Mustang time. Time to bring the Elric brothers into the city, time to keep these Central buffoons entertained.

“Something I said, generals?” she said, eyebrow quirked.

Fox smirked.

“Have you forgotten why you’re here, Armstrong?” he said. “Have your forgotten your role in all of this? Be quiet, be obedient, be pliant. After all, that is what is asked of a prisoner, isn’t it?”

She held his gaze.

“With you here,” he continued, “Briggs is held hostage as well. They will not think of leaving their war to save you, let alone when you are so deep into the heart of another one.” His smile was stale and untrue. “As you can see, everything was once carefully considered.”

“For once, you are right,” she said, but she didn’t give him enough time to figure out what that meant. “Briggs knows nothing of why I’m here. And even if they did, my soldiers wouldn’t risk it all
to save but a piece of the puzzle. They don’t need me, they never have. Those men can act as their own force. What they can accomplish on their own is no less great than what they would with me at their command. That’s the strength of the Briggs army. Don’t even begin to assume you know the soldiers I’ve trained and be grateful you will never get to see them in action, General Fox.”

Right that second, the door to the room opened and some officer came in, panting.

“Klemin just called on the radio,” the officer said. “Soldiers dressed in white ambushed him when he was chasing Mustang’s team. We think they’re from the north. And they’re ready for combat.”

“Briggs?” Gardner asked, passively.

“We—we think so, yes, sir.”

Olivier almost asked him to repeat what he had said. It just was not possible, not in the slightest. What could her men be doing here? And what was more important, how had they known to be there?

This complicated things for the senior staff. It generally complicated everything. Now Olivier would have to get them to leave the city, on top of having to go on her much longed for murder spree, as her last service to a country she had tried to believe in until the end, despite obvious difficulties.

When the officer left, Fox stood up with a slam on the table, facing Olivier.

“Call off your soldiers right now!” He presumed she had called them, somehow. And he couldn’t be more wrong. Perhaps she had judged him too kindly earlier.

“The Führer relieved me of my command of the Briggs soldiers” she reminded him, calmly. “There is nothing I can do.”

“Do you really think you can get away with this?”

“Do you?” she asked. “Today, the entire country will go up in flames because of you. Because of Father’s plan to sacrifice every soul on Amestris to grasp eternal life.” Her tone was full of contempt. There was nothing she despised more than a man who thought himself immortal, except for one who thought he would be if he butchered other people’s mortality. “Did you think there wouldn’t be people willing to put up a fight for those you intend to kill?”

The laws of alchemy spoke of exchange. To receive, you must give something of equal value in return. But no human life was worth adding endless years to another, not if the former didn’t consent to it, didn’t even know if it.

“Eternal life will be ours after today. Even you, Armstrong, will get a taste of it.” Gardner pitched in, conversationally. “All the sacrifices made on this journey will be worthless to you after that.”

“You hopeless bastards have never understood a thing,” she said, eyes closed.

Her heart pounded while her exterior remained cool. It was time. She would await no news of Mustang. She was in this alone, as he was alone in his own endeavor. The day had begun, the eclipse dimmed the daylight; it was time to fight.

“What—”

She was quicker than she’d expected to be, for someone so out of practice. Her sword was out before any of the generals could realize it, through Fox’s forearm. The poetics of it almost made her
laugh right then. She remembered another similar wound, back at home. A dead man buried in concrete. Would she do the same with Fox, when this was over? Would she bury them all, depriving them of their eternal life? Calling them what they were: men, dead men.

Gone.

Fox exclaimed with pain, but he didn’t move.

“We will end you,” Gardner hissed for Fox, who was unable to in his shock—but whether that shock came from the wound in his arm or Olivier’s betrayal, she couldn’t have said. “You and your Briggs scum. Just like we did at Ishval, just like we did with the Xingese years ago.

Olivier used her other hand to bring out her gun and point it at General Gardner. Another dead man.

“Ishval’s cause I know well, but… Xing? Since when have any of you idiots had the guts to cross the desert for war?”

“There was no crossing the desert!” Fox said. “We killed them all here. Every last Xingese in our country. Just like in Ishval,” he repeated.

Olivier almost dropped her sword and gun, almost gave up. We killed them all. Every last Xingese in our country. Every last Xingese. Why? Why? Why? What did Xing have that Central could fear so much?

What, Olivier? she asked herself, but her own voice was dragged and muddy beneath the echo of her heartbeats in her ears. What?

—the Elrics looking for an alkahestry expert in the mountains, those empty shelves at the library where the alkahestry books should have been, an abandoned house where a Xingese family had used to live—

Central hadn’t set off on a purge of Xingese blood. They had been trying to eradicate an unknown force that could have stopped them today.

And she knew what this meant. She knew, in her heart, what those words meant. That they had lost, that Central always watched their backs. That a Xingese girl from Olivier’s memories might be dead.

But the house had been left untouched, no object out of place, no marks of blood or resistance. Ianthe must be alive, Ianthe must have escaped.

If you’re ever to have hope, Armstrong, have it now, said a voice within her head that was and wasn’t her own. She tightened the grip on her sword, caressed the trigger of her loaded gun.

“No, not all. You didn’t kill everyone,” she just said.

“We crushed them! Just like we will do to your wild northern filth,” Gardner shrill voice said in continued defiance. “One by one, you will all fall to our eternal glory. You will be the final sacrifice!”

Even when held at gunpoint, he thought he was right. He thought he was entitled to survival, to killing millions all so he would live on forever. Even at her mercy, he didn’t think her a threat. And she was.

“You disgust me,” Olivier said, furious now. Never the demure woman who wasn’t allowed to escape or speak, never the poor woman whose soldiers loved and respected out of so-called pity,
never the Armstrong her mother had tried to shape her to be. It was time. It was her time. “Sitting back, safely watching the battlefield as if it were some kind of spectator sport. You don’t know anything about sacrifice.”

She pulled the trigger.

“No, wait!” Fox shouted, his arm still impaled on the Armstrong sword.

But Gardner fell to the floor with a thud.

The apparent quiet had slowly given way to blocked streets and crowds around the road blocks, half civilian half military, all gathered as if they were waiting for something. More smoke to raise up into the air, another skirmish to either run or face.

It had begun the only way it could. And Zinnia could only guess what it would get to as the hours passed. If it was already like this, then that meant something was loose in the city. Something the Central troops were trying to control.

She shuddered at the thought of the creatures Olivier had described, ghastly and white, with red eyes and sharp teeth. She knew it was too early for them already and yet she couldn’t help it. They were a horror she was not looking forward to.

Seeking comfort, she touched the knives she’d strapped to her clothes, reassured herself that they were safely secured and wouldn’t just fall. Who knew when she would begin needing them?

For now, the streets were just less navigable. When she passed a block, she just had to find a way around it. And for a while she could, there was no danger in changing neighborhoods, going around the city to get to its center, but the closer she walked to Central Command the harder it was to find a proper way into it.

Up ahead, at the junction of two streets, dozens of people pooled around. An ambulance was parked in the middle of the road, too, and several officers were waiting around. One of them towered over the rest in both build and height.

Alex!

Zinnia almost ran to him. He would know what the situation was like and, most importantly, where she could find Olivier. No matter where she was, Zinnia would get there and stand with her. Perhaps she’d make a scene first, she hadn’t decided yet, but she was not staying back, letting everyone stand their ground while she waited somewhere secluded for a conclusion to this day.

The major didn’t seem to have noticed her. How could he have? His back was turned to her and he was leaning towards some other officer as he whispered something to his ear. Immediately, Alex’s torso shot back up to its upright position.

Zinnia pushed her way through the curious passersby that stood in the middle of the sidewalk and jumped over the road blocks the military had set around the whole area.

Someone tried to get her to return to the safe area, but she merely glanced up at him and said, her voice as cold as ice:

“Back off if you know what’s good for you.” She wasn’t in the mood to get pissed off today.
He didn’t bother her anymore as she approached Alex and tugged at his sleeve to get his attention.

“Oh my!” he exclaimed at the sight of her.

Truth be told, she didn’t look very flattering. Her hair was all over the place, even more than usual, and it was dull and greasy from the few days she’d spent in the mountains. Likewise, her clothes were torn and ragged, dirtied up by paths meant for herds, not humans. And, what may have been most shocking about her, she had a tiredness to her that only increased her power. She was done, and she would take no shit today. She was here to help, in any way she could. She was here to live or die hand-in-hand with Olivier, her lover and spurned traitor.

“You’re… here. But I thought you—”

She found no desire in her heart to cling to the realization that he’d known about her … abandonment in the west.

“Your sister. Where is she?” Zinnia asked.

“Oh,” Alex stuttered. “About that, I—”

“No, it’s just—She’s in Central Command and, well, knowledge has just reached me that she’s … just killed two generals in cold blood.” Alex averted his eyes to the ground. Zinnia didn’t have to think hard to know he regretted what his sister had done and that he would suffer for her fate.

But Zinnia just happened to suffer more. And she was prepared to act on that much faster than anyone else. She had to get to Central Command.

“Okay, thanks,” she said, and she turned around to leave just the way she’d come.

“Wait!” he called. “You can’t. I will head there. You need to stay back, stay safe.”

“I swear to whatever you hold most dear, if someone says that word back to me ever again—”

Alex put a hand to her shoulder, and he did it so gently he managed to somehow placate the rage going in within her, a rage more powerful than the wish to find Olivier safe and sound. Maybe, in her heart, both rage and worry united, creating a hybrid of emotions she did not know how to control.

“There is nothing you can do,” he said calmly, always showing facts before he lied about them. “I will take good care of Olivier. Meanwhile, please stay here. You will hear what is going on better, I think.” He looked her in the eye. He had Olivier’s eyes, but his looked sad now, their usual vigor hidden. “Besides, I do not believe there is a single safe place left in the city today.”

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Mustang kidnapped Mrs. Bradley. There are a few troops after him, but the city center is closed to the public.” Now, he leaned towards her. “With Olivier’s actions, I am afraid it will get much worse. I need to get her out of there.”

“But—” He started running away from there, taking off his coat and throwing it to the air as he snapped open his jacket and shirt.

Zinnia stayed where she was for a second, flabbergasted. But once the shock had worn off, she lost
herself in the crowds. She was going to find a way into Central Command, whatever it took.

Every step came with a drop of blood hitting the carpet. It echoed loudly when there was nothing else to hear. It was the tick of a giant clock, and the hour was no longer near but here. Olivier had kicked the gears into motion.

Fox’s forearm bled and his shoulders trembled underneath her tensed arm, preventing him from escaping. The Armstrong sword was much too near to his pretty face and he feared losing it. All vain men were stupid to rely on their looks as much as they did, they were so easily ruined. One deep cut and there went all vanity. But Olivier held herself. This wasn’t about vengeance but strategy.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” she said into Fox’s ears. “You will order your forces to retreat and your lives will be spared.”

“What makes you think I will do as you say?”

“Because if you don’t,” she said, “blood will run. Much thicker and faster than your skinny arm’s, Fox, understand? Your men are no match for the soldiers of Briggs. And you are obviously no match for me.”

Fox whimpered bleakly. Pathetic, just pathetic. But she must admit there was some resilience to him if he wasn’t screaming from the pain or for help. He must have known that if he did, she would slice his throat and die killing.

“Never!” the man croaked.

His voice must have acted as an alarm, as she had imagined, and soon enough half a dozen men had run to meet them. Their eyes opened in surprise when they saw Olivier’s sword so close to slicing open Fox’s neck.

It didn’t take them too long to draw their guns at her.

When they did, she just chuckled.

“Are you truly going to shoot me?” she teased. “And what if you hit him? Who wants to be responsible for killing their superior?”

The men’s hands shook slightly.

“Just as I thought.” Olivier smiled and said into Fox’s ears. “Cowards, the lot of them. They would rather see you dead.” The edge of her sword caressed Fox’s chin, and she fixed her eyes on the soldiers up front. “Pull your forces back now.”

“Close all the gates,” bellowed Fox, taken her by surprise for only half a second. “Seal every entrance to the command center. Don’t let them in!”

Olivier dipped her sword into the general’s right foot. He screamed, but he still pulled it together to say: “We will kill every last one of you.”

Olivier was getting ready to end his miserable little life and face his cowardly men when a shadow came upon her. The skin on the back of her neck pickled uncomfortably.

She had known this feeling before. She had basked in it for the duration of an entire night. It had
been the only time she had been in the presence of a Homunculus.

Olivier jumped aside, and when the claw of the monster Sloth came upon General Fox, crushing him flat on the carpet, the blood sprinkled over to her hair and uniform.

“The woman general,” Sloth slugged out. “I was told … to kill you.”

“Don’t get close to Central Command!”

“Monsters! There’s monsters!”

The voices lost themselves in the tumult of people running everywhere but to the heart of the city. The crowd didn’t disintegrate, it flowed into lines of citizens fleeing in every direction possible, screaming. Some flocked to their houses to lock themselves in, some picked whatever weapon they could and held their ground on the streets, but the vast majority did what Zinnia was doing: just running.

Only she ran against them. Past crashes and smashed-in windows, over spoilt produce, into pools of used ammunition. She recognized the patterns, knew she was crossing a scene in which not that long ago two sides had fought.

She must be close to where Mustang’s team had been.

And that meant she was even closer to Central Command.

The monsters scared her, but she was small and on her own, and if the battles were fought elsewhere, she would make it. She had to believe that she would. Despite the burning in her lungs from running and the taste of bile deep into her stomach, Zinnia wouldn’t give up. She had come too far to go back.

And when the legion spread, Alex’s words would become a reality. No place in the city would be safe. Soon after that, the legion would reach the towns, too.

When Zinnia heard shooting, she ran faster.

Next thing she knew, a hand grabbed her clothes, pulled her into the darkness.

She tried to get them off, kick them, even.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” she said.

The same hand that had grabbed her covered her mouth.

“Stay still,” they said. So she did.

“I thought I’d seen ’em here,” said a voice outside. From where she was, Zinnia could see a narrow gap of the outside world. Someone must have closed the door they’d come in through. A couple of soldiers with machine guns walked idly past the gap. “They can’t have gotten far.”

A few seconds later, their footsteps could no longer be heard and Zinnia’s mouth was her own again.

A light came on and Zinnia was eye-to-eye with the face of the rebellion. Roy Mustang in the flesh, much closer than ever, with a few scratches all over his face.
Zinnia almost squealed when someone else dragged Mustang a few paces back.

“Will you behave like a normal human being, boss?” came the voice of who Zinnia recognized—under the light—as being his lieutenant Riza Hawkeye.

“Sorry,” Mustang apologized to Zinnia. “This zone is closed to civilians. They would have killed you on sight.”

She looked around and saw that all of them were dressed in civilian clothes except for Mustang himself. Hawkeye, a black-haired woman with earrings, and a young small man with glasses up front, another woman with curly fair hair at the back holding a gun and seemingly guarding an older woman who sat on a three-legged chair. If this zone was truly closed off because of Mustang, then he was right in that the Central soldiers would have assumed she was part of it too.

“They have orders to,” Mustang continued. “It’s not safe here.”

Zinnia almost rolled her eyes. No one here had to know about her aversion about that word, especially not now. She said nothing and just stared at the little group of people in front of her. And this was all? This was everyone who was going to face the government?

She understood now why Olivier had felt so down on her luck working with them.

Mustang surveyed her for a few seconds. He had recognized her, she was sure, even dressed like this. And she was grateful he didn’t comment on her being here when she should have been miles and miles away. Perhaps she had been quick to judge this man. Perhaps he understood more than it seemed.

“This is your great plan?” Zinnia asked. “Just staying here until they come get you?”

Someone cocked their gun at the back as a response.

“We move from place to place, there is a car waiting a few miles ahead.”

“You’ll never reach it at this point,” she said. “They unleashed the Immortal Legion.”

Mustang cursed under his breath. Hawkeye put a hand to his shoulder.

“We need to keep going, sir,” she said. “It won’t be long until they search here again.”

After a few seconds, Mustang breathed out and nodded, turning to Zinnia again.

“Coming with, Mrs. Erwin?”

“Actually, I could use your help.”

Mustang blinked.

“I’m all ears.”

“I need to get into headquarters,” she said. “Olivier’s in there.”

Mustang looked her in the eye, compassionately.

“We can’t spare any man.”

“Can you spare a gun?” she asked. She wouldn’t ask for someone to shield her from gunshots and
monsters, she would shoot back herself if the moment came.

Mustang shook his head slowly.

“‘I’m sorry,’” he said. Then, he put a hand on her shoulder. “I know this isn’t easy to hear, and for what it’s worth, I hate that I have to be the one to tell you, but … General Armstrong is as good as dead. If what you said is true and those monsters are already out, she doesn’t have long in there. It’s a trap.”

Zinnia stared him in the eye. He was being honest and, in his own view, probably understanding as well, but he was still wrong. He had to be. Zinnia would have to get there first, before anyone did anything to Olivier. She would have to say her piece, loud and clear, and draw both knives out. Death could come swiftly or not after that, but she would be in peace anyway.

“Come with us, Erwin,” he said, dropping the honorific, and so clearly trying to cheer her up. As if one ever recovered from what he had just said to her. “We’ll get you out of town. We’ll get you to safety.”

“Thanks, Mustang,” she said, “but no thanks. I’ve somewhere to be.”

They all left the building at the same time, but Zinnia headed north. Always north.

She didn’t look back.

____________________________________

Deep breaths.

There was no time to breathe. Sloth used his chains against her, sloshed them around, threw them in her direction over and over again. What use was a sword against that? Even when she cut him, the wounds closed by the time she’d darted away.

Deep breaths, her brain told her. A brain that hadn’t really fought in months. A brain that needed her to be calm and alert.

But all she was was exhilarated. Death awaited her today, but it wouldn’t make the journey easy for her, and for some reason she was delighted by that fact. It was better to go down fighting than meekly meet her end at the wrong end of a gun.

And speaking of—

Olivier dragged out her gun, pointed at Sloth and shot several times. Each bullet that hit his skin bounced right back to the floor, its metal making a sound when they did.

“Should’ve known to save myself the trouble…” she mumbled.

If the tanks back at Briggs hadn’t grazed him, nothing would. She had to find something stronger.

In that very last thread of a thought, Sloth’s chain almost brought her down. Olivier rolled on the floor and stood back up again, throwing her hair back and staring at him fiercely.

And just like that, the door behind her opened and a voice echoed loud.

“Freeze! You are under arrest, General Armstrong!”
She turned back for just a second and saw a bunch of soldiers aiming at her. She almost warned them. Almost.

In the next breath she’d taken, Sloth had already charged against them with all his strength. *You dead imbeciles*… she thought, hiding behind a column, waiting for Sloth to find her again. This would be an interesting dance.

Herself against the biggest Homunculus while the city fell. What an occasion. It would be the one time Olivier would get to unleash the true Armstrong strength, passed down from parent to offspring for generations, and still face defeat.

She held her breath, trying to listen for the heavy boots of the monster against the floors. The room was silent.

“Where are you?” she mumbled. It was impossible for him to have disappeared, and in his monstrous size, she should have been able to hear him breathe and move.

And she did.

A humongous hand emerged from behind the column and pressed her hard against it.

“Must … kill … woman general,” Sloth said as his titanic hand tightened around her, compressing her every second a little more. Olivier did not want to make a sound, but she was unable to remain quiet and proud. A painful moan escaped her mouth.

*Better to die fighting, but this is only struggling.*

Struggling for that breath she’d told herself to draw. Struggling to open her eyes over the pain, as if someone had decided to drop her at a trash compactor and left her to be tortured into smallness.

A sound of cracked marble met her ears. Perhaps she would struggle no more. She wanted to wish so, she wanted to give in. For so long, she’d waited for the moment she’d finally give in, leave this world behind. But never had she imagined it would be like this, in powerlessness, in agony. Alone.

*Someone like me is always bound to die alone*…

Sloth’s hand managed to break the core of the column.

And then—it just … *let go.*

When Olivier opened her eyes again, she was on the floor, clutching her shoulder, and Sloth was in the opposite end of the room. Death would have to wait a little longer, until she found the strength to get back up, unsheathe her sword once more, and go down fighting.

“Sister,” said the voice of who clearly should not have been her savior. She looked up at over seven feet tall of buff. “Are you alright?”

Olivier wanted to say no, she wanted to lay back against this column and just die there. But she was an Armstrong, and she carried unsurmountable stamina in her veins, so she just glared at her shirtless brother.

“Who do you think I am? Of course I’m alright.”

“My, my,” Alex said, beaming, very much unlike he had just brought down several tons of monster. “No need for modesty.”
“I’ll gift you with none,” she spat, managing to get up at last and stand next to him, staring down at Sloth’s inert body on the floor.

“Very well,” Alex said. “Now, would you care to explain who this atrocity is?”

“Homunculus. Bullets and the like don’t work, so don’t bother.”

“I didn’t plan to.” He flexed just like he had days ago in the garden with the setting sun upon them. Olivier had trouble believing that had happened as recently as it had. She felt this day had lasted for decades, yet it had only just started. Spring would be the end of her. She missed her long winters of patrols and gossip. She missed a war she had never gotten to fight, not this bloodshed. Not this injustice. “Let me have a stab at it, will you? You’ve done enough.”

At that, the beast rose from the floor, mumbling under his breath.

“What … a … pain…”

Olivier lifted her sword as Alex took a step forward and used alchemy to create stone projectiles the size of his own head to throw at the Homunculus. A little bit of … something luminous and vibrating had settled in her core. The excitement of battle turned less sticky, turned bright.

If Alex failed to win at this, she would step in. She would fight, in pain or not. She would make him proud. It was, in a way, like it had always been. She was the figure he looked up to, and she did her best for him to continue thinking she was the best, even if all she was was a pariah in her own family.

Her smile materialized without her permission as Alex conjured up spikes and spiraled them towards the beast time and time again, without even breaking a sweat. Her brother had grown up and she had missed it.

When one of his spikes brushed the vicinity of Sloth’s head, Olivier acted fast, climbed atop of Sloth and drew her sword into both his eyes and later tearing open his skull. The monster managed to push her off of him, but she still landed on her feet.

“Aim for his head,” she told Alex. “He’s weaker there.”

And Alex discovered, surprised, that she was right. Sloth held now his head in his hands, stumbling forward as if he had just been blinded by something.

With a grunt, he levitated half a fallen column from earlier, carved a sharp point to it, and threw it like a javelin at Sloth’s face. Even in his position, Sloth deviated it with just one swoop of his giant hand.

“It’s over, General Armstrong!”

Ah, so more soldiers had come. Apparently just a few hadn’t been trusted enough to deal with her. And whoever had sent them had been right in their assumptions.

But these soldiers were quicker than the last batch to assume something was wrong. Their jaws dropped at the sight of Sloth, as any normal human’s would.

“What the hell is that thing?”

In the time it took Olivier to blink, Sloth was gone again and then reappeared against the frame of the door, where the soldiers had waited for her to give herself up and where now there were splotches of
blood and blue.

“What was that?” Alex asked in a mutter, almost afraid to rouse the monster once again, to draw its attention and be the next victim of this skill they hadn’t known he had.

Olivier had no time to reply.

Sloth moved again, with incredible speed, at a blur. At first, Olivier felt nothing, just a whoosh of something stronger than wind. Then, drops. Warm drops of something liquid that were staining the sleeve of her uniform. And lastly a bout of pain that went through her right arm like a hot knife through butter and doubled her over.

“Olivier…” Alex said. She felt his hand on her unhurt shoulder. But she pushed him away.

Armstrong. A name that couldn’t be defiled now, in such a situation.

Her name, her legacy, her reputation.

Her choices.

I will be damned if I let this stop me.

So she didn’t.

“It’s just a scratch,” she told Alex. To reassure him, his sweet and gentle heart, that cared even in the heat of a fight. How long had he dreamed of this, she wondered, of standing side by side with her in battle? And just how badly was she ruining his daydream by not being the unattainable standard of lethality?

It wasn’t just a scratch. She felt it as clearly as she’d feared it, the fractures in several places of her arm. She felt the bone protruding the skin at least in one place and just bit her lip, made sure to grab her sword with her left hand, and lifted it up again.

“He’s fast…” Olivier said. “But he can’t control where he goes, can he?”

“He would have hit us the first time alongside those men,” Alex said in all seriousness, agreeing with her.

A third time, Sloth dashed forward. Third time was the charm, so the saying went. Olivier watched her brother get caught up in the blur, thrown violently across the room onto the cold hard floors.

“Are you alright?” she asked him.

And she shouldn’t have. She really shouldn’t have. The hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention. She had looked away for a moment, just a brief second to check on Alex. And yet … it had been enough. The Homunculus’ presence gathered whole behind her. She tried to turn to face him in time, and instead tripped on some debris pooling around.

Her back hit a wall.

And she knew she was a fly in a spider’s nest long before her brain processed it. Long before the shadow of Sloth approached at top speed. She saw him then, in every blurred step he took. Some say we witness our lives before us when death comes near. Olivier saw death itself for the second time today.

And for the second time, too, that feeling… that emotion close to hope gathered in the pit of her
stomach when a light stepped in between her and the sultry darkness of Sloth.  

Death never came.  

Alex. A foot on the wall, just above Olivier, and holding Sloth back with both hands. The light pooled again on the knuckles of her brother, sucking a hole in the floor where Sloth stood and pulling him down onto the lower level.  

Both siblings watched his humongous body fall in silence. Until it was broken by Alex’s tiny whimper as he put a hand to his shoulder and winced.  

“Alex,” Olivier said. Thank you, she should have said. I’m sorry, she should have said. Go!, she would say next. Go before it kills you.  

But her brother understood the calling of his name as Olivier’s worry, and she would let him have that. Worry was the least conspicuous way of explaining what exactly she felt about him being here, putting his life at risk to save her.  

To die with her.  

Hadn’t she tried to push him away once? Hadn’t he returned to the mansion with a smile? Olivier should have commanded him but she didn’t. Not anymore.  

“It’s just dislocated,” Alex said, pulling off a faint smile at her. “You?”  

“A few fractures, that’s all.” The truth, at last.  

Alex’s smile grew wider, and she could have sworn he was about to say something, when the floor came crumbling down. They fell as Sloth had fallen.  

It was a long, long fall. Longer than the day was being. Longer than thirty years. Blood ran thick across Olivier’s right arm, she couldn’t move it anymore, and she didn’t dare to. The entire sleeve of her blue uniform was a dark red now. And her body… it would sustain bruises all over, if it didn’t already. But this fall, this fall took the highest toll on her.  

The floor below didn’t move, she fell towards it, and yet it was as if it was coming to meet her sooner than it had to, harder than it had to. Olivier didn’t wonder if it would hurt, she had been raised to not fear pain and trained to learn that if she felt it it didn’t matter, because all that mattered was getting back up and saving a life that wasn’t her own.  

Her body made a sound when it hit that floor, but she didn’t get to hear it.  

Alex did. He rushed to her, knelt by her side, and knew not to touch her. Many wounds could be caused by such a fall, and all of them would get worse if she was moved.  

The low groaning voice of the Homunculus reached him.  

“I finally killed her.”  

Two little girls played in the terrace, carefully dressed in blue and pink respectively, their attires visibly portentous and expensive and not at all childlike. Their giggles, carrying all the way into the room, did not sound like a child’s either, refined and soft as if someone had taught them not to laugh too loudly.
“Girls, girls!” a feminine voice said. “Not too loud, okay?”

She hadn’t liked dolls, not even back then. It wasn’t as if she had the chance to play with anything. She heard her little sisters playing while she sat at a desk, surrounded by books on geography and history, her mother—the feminine voice—demurely sitting on a chaise with a baby in her arms. It was a very small baby, and the third she had ever seen. But she had been much too young before to know what had been going on when her sisters had been born. Now she was five, a young lady in the making, in her mother’s words. And she stared at the baby with curious and envious eyes. It was a boy, her mother had said. The first boy to be born into the family. He would inherit one day, her mother also said, when she thought she wasn’t listening.

She didn’t understand, then, what that meant and why it was important. She only knew she wanted to hold that baby, teach him what she knew and what she would learn in the future, run with him in the gardens and play at war with him. She only knew she wanted to be allowed to love that baby.

The image dissolved like aspirin in water. She could no longer hear the little girls playing nor her mother’s voice telling them off and then murmuring sweet words to her fourth child. She heard nothing but a ringing in her ears. She felt nothing but her skull, crushed and throbbing.

Her body was in a mangled state of pain.

Olivier opened her eyes. Her sight was blurry, her field of vision gray and blue. There was so much blue in it, and this blue she knew because she wore it.

“What—what happened?” she muttered.

She tried to sit up but her head felt as if it had been stabbed. She put a hand to her temple and it came back bloody.

When her eyes got used to the light, to being open again, she saw what was going on. The blue she’d seen was the blue of the uniforms of a new batch of soldiers, all staring in awe at … Alex. Alex, who had finally managed to hold off the beast.

A large spike the size of a bus that seemed to have come out of the floor had pierced the arm and mouth of Sloth’s body. Alex breathed heavily next to it, admiring his work. He turned around almost in slow motion, chest heaving, and walked to her, now aware that she was awake again.

He knelt and even then she had to look up at him.

“I lost you for a moment,” he said. “I thought I’d lost you forever.”

“I’m here,” she said, dismissive. “I’m fine.”

“Are you able to stand?” he asked.

She couldn’t give him her answer.

Once more, these stupefied soldiers had reemerged from their stupor and realized that they had a mission to complete on this very unroutinary day, cocking their guns at the ready. With Sloth out of commission, would they succeed in shooting Olivier down at last? Or would a next batch be necessary?

This would only add to her already blotted enough reputation.

“I believe this is the moment to tell you I’m to be executed for treason,” Olivier said nonchalantly.
“Oh, I already knew,” Alex said. “That is why I came. I was expecting a few soldiers at the very least. The monster was a nice surprise.”

Olivier smiled without meaning to. Then she saw her brother’s terrified face.

“If they kill you now,” he said, “who will inherit the mansion? Mother will be furious, there’s no paperwork drafted!”

“I doubt she will be,” Olivier said. “I already put Colonel Mustang down to be my successor, don’t worry. It’s all in place. I’m not foolish enough to go to my death without tying up loose ends.”

“And didn’t it occur to you to leave it to your sisters or me?” Alex said.

“Oh, come on, Alex!” she said in exasperation. “You know why I couldn’t leave it to anyone in the family.”

That seemed to shut Alex up.

At least until Sloth’s unmoving body seemed to come back alive, red sparkles going all over the surface of his skin.

At least until the door was busted down—

“Is it Mustang’s men?” asked one of the soldiers.

—and the Immortal Legion came in.

Alex gasped so loudly Olivier thought he would have been heard all around the city.

The soldiers’ shots brought the legion down with a thud, at least the first few that came in, but in a matter of seconds the scrawny figures slithered back up to their feet, mercilessly approaching them all.

“What are these things?” one of the soldiers said in panic, shooting with his hand but not his head.

“How dare you compare these filth to the brave men of the north?” Olivier bellowed. But she seemed to take one full deep breath and remembered it was no time to defend her men. They should know how to do that on their own, wherever in the city they must be. She fixed her gaze up on the eyes of the officer in charge. “Whoever sent you down here must have let these creatures loose.”

The officer didn’t listen; he just pointed his loaded gun at her. She chuckled to herself.

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As they spoke, the legion attacked the soldiers again.

Olivier paid them no attention. She had a gun pointing at her that was just as dangerous as those white creatures.

“So, what’s it going to be, soldier?” she told the officer. “Me and my brother can handle this scum.”

“Maybe so, but—”

There was a … sizzling, loud enough that it took over his words, and then a thud as a giant forearm fell onto the floor and another giant forearm regrew on Sloth’s skin.
If Alex’s gasp had been loud before, the collective gasp of them all was louder when Sloth’s teeth sank onto the spike Alex had used to impale his mouth and snapped it into shrapnel with an inhuman groan.

Olivier yanked at the wrist of the officer in front of her. The cold surface of the gun was on her forehead now—by her choice.

**Better to go down fighting than meekly meet her end at the wrong end of a gun.** It was better to go down at the right end of a gun than meekly meet her end in the crushing hold of a monster.

“What’s it going to be?” she screamed at the officer whose hand would decide whether she lived or died. She was tired of this. So many had been sent to kill her, so many had died trying. And here, in the umpteenth brink of death of the day, was just as much a right place to die as any other. She just wanted it to come swiftly. Nothing better than a bullet for that.

But would he shoot? He was from Central, a coward by definition. And cowards valued their lives too much. She could have his in her hands if she was allowed to live, if she was allowed to stand up and keep fighting for them all alongside with Alex.

**Better to go down fighting than meet a meek end.**

“Will you shoot me and become easy prey for these monsters? Or will you swallow your pride, your orders, and work with us to bring them down together?”

Perhaps she just didn’t want to die, if she kept screaming. Perhaps she just wanted this over. In whatever way it came. Would it be called death if she fell into it willingly, if she was ready to have a trigger pulled on her?

Buccaneer had once spoken of wishing to have a death proper of a man. Was this that death? Or was this suicide in disguise? Was it just resignation, rushing it so that it came when she chose to, not when she couldn’t outrun it anymore?

Olivier had accepted it a long time ago, that she would die on March 21st 1915. But she had signed no contract on how it would happen.

*Is this the death of a man that you want? Or is it the death of a soldier you’ve always felt you had to strive for?* A death in service.

The burn of the gun against her forehead faded.

A hand was offered to her. She took it and stood up again.

“We’re all going to die anyway,” the officer said.

Sloth was free and more legion soldiers came in, relentless even when slow. He might have been right, after all. Maybe Olivier was only delaying the unavoidable.

Or, maybe, she thought as more officers dressed in blue descended from the hole in the ceiling, some things were still avoidable.

“Stop what you’re doing!” the newcomers said. “Apprehend her!”

The day had gone from apprehending to shooting to more apprehending.

“Disappointing as it is,” she said. “Now you all answer to me!”
She looked around at the soldiers. They were quite a few. If the legion continued to arrive in such numbers, perhaps they would be able to stop them, to kill them one by one until there were none left. How many souls had Central been able to create? What qualified as an army to them?

When they came, the legion started running like Olivier didn’t know they could. Alex was the one to meet them, having stolen one of Sloth’s chains and now waving it around like a leather whip.

“Stand down” he yelled.

No one really did, though. The officers assumed shooting positions and Olivier held her sword tight in her left hand, her right arm limp on her thigh. It had been a while since she’d been able to concentrate on the pain, pulsating and debilitating. And it didn’t look like she would get much of a chance to in the next few minutes.

“Bullets are useless,” she yelled over the gunshots for the soldiers to take note. “Aim for the jaws and limbs to restrain them.”

The few Central men behind her held their guns up at the sight of more and more legion soldiers coming at them like zombies in a terribly written horror novel.

Olivier swallowed any terror her body might hold within and hoisted her sword, all ready to cut down through flesh and bone alike. She had assumed her natural position, first line in a war, small as this one was, with people under her command who looked up to her.

“Shoot them in pairs,” she continued, “and bring down at least one at a time.”

A collective ‘yes’ hit her ears.

“Show me your courage, Central men!” she said, and she hoped to whoever deity could be hearing her that there was some courage to be found in their hearts, after all. She couldn’t believe she had gotten to a point in her life where she had to trust Central soldiers to have courage, of all things.

It was easy, really really easy at first. These legion soldiers were not skilled at all, just lifeless eternal creatures that went on and on no matter how many times she sliced them open, cut them down, and sent them flying across the room. Bullets pierced them but didn’t hurt them, and the more that came into the room, the less Olivier knew what she was doing, only that she had to continue to do it because it was working.

White heads with red eyes began to clutter the floor where they fought, and headless bodies came back for another round she was more than willing to bring down on them as many times as it was necessary.

That was why she did not notice at first, not even when there were several cries of pain behind her.

“General!” some of the soldiers reached out to her. “He’s gonna kill the major. Do something!”

She swiftly turned for a moment to find her brother on his knees in front of the charging beast. But she saw something in his eyes that none of these Central idiots could ever see—because they did not know Alex.

Alex Armstrong would one day meet his end, yes, but not like this. And not today. Not if she had to stand between him and Sloth to prevent it.

Alex seemed to be down, but he was merely biding his time. There was a glimmer to his shaven head, the Armstrong sparkle in hiding.
When Sloth came at him, Alex used the momentum of it to help fix the dislocation in his arm. Then, his fist pushed right through Sloth’s jaw, bringing him to the floor.

“Nice!” Olivier said, loud enough for her brother to hear. He turned, too, to grant her a small smile in return. She knew, then, he was grateful for her comment. She had never told him anything like this before. She had never been appreciative of him before.

If Sloth hadn’t been a Homunculus, he would not have stood a chance before Alex’s boxing routine. Fists and fists of pure Armstrong strength came upon the monster before Alex unleashed the rawest power of alchemy upon him again.

“Stop shooting! She’s a civilian!”

Little did that matter to the Central troops. They had been ordered to shoot everything on sight, were it Mustang’s team, Briggs men or whomever was unlucky enough to still be around. Their mission was to shoot down the insurgent and they had no time to lose.

Zinnia glared at them from behind the fallen façade of a building, putting pressure on her left upper arm, where a bullet had just grazed her as she ran away from them. Blood stained her hand, but only superficially. She wouldn’t bleed out from that.

Lines and lines of Briggs men shot back at Central right behind her, shielded behind a moving formation that looked like a shield. She heard the whirring of a tank, not too far away, too. Their shock at seeing them hadn’t been as great as it could have been. It seemed they had thought the same thing she had: Olivier could not be allowed to die today.

“Are you fucking nuts?” some Briggs man yelled again when the Central soldiers kept firing at her, trying to hit a target that they couldn’t see. Maybe they planned to trap her there until their formations advanced a little more. “She’s not part of this!”

“No need for that,” Zinnia said back to him. “It’s not like they care.”

Besides, she was a part of Briggs too. Her side was theirs. Getting shot at because of that didn’t seem that bad.

The slaps of the men’s boots against the concrete grew louder. Both teams were finally covering ground. Central defending the Operations Center with all their might and Briggs threatening it like they had always threatened everything else. Their resolve could easily be mistaken for arrogance on such a day.

“Shoot the motherfuckers!” the order came almost at the same time that Zinnia made herself even smaller, still putting the refuge of the stone to good use.

The tank’s firepower was soon upon the Central men. She had to cover her ears and it still left her gaping for sound. When she opened her eyes, the rubble had given way to corpses on the sidewalks. She didn’t look away.

This was the war Olivier had tried so hard to protect her from. And in her way to achieve that, that very war had found itself interwoven in Zinnia’s life. If fate was so capricious, it might as well be understood as nonexistent. Or as cruel.

And if fate is as cruel as war, why not fight it, too?
Briggs threw their planks of metal and shields away, rising like bears hoisting themselves on their rear legs in the dust. Guns in their hands, they shot the remaining live soldiers from Central, ever moving towards the barricaded door of the Operations Center.

Zinnia didn’t get up. She worried that if she did, the Central men would rouse like zombies and attack again and again, now that Briggs had no defense.

A hand on her shoulder startled her.

“Kid, lemme take a look at that.” She looked up to see who was talking, but the sun blinded her. She only saw a towering silhouette of black and a reflection on metal. The voice should have given him away, but she was too stunned to think. Wars were easier to be in on paper.

He helped put her back on her feet as men and tank moved forwards.

“We should take her to doc,” another voice said. Another voice she should have known.

But all she saw was the deserted battlefield, the blood on it, the bodies. And all she felt was quiet. This was what it was like, and she understood it, she respected it. In a way, she even liked it, the way it made her blood boil, her heart pound in her chest, either aching to get out to see or scared to have to see it.

Zinnia shook her head. This war needed to be fought with a clear head.

Now, when she looked up, she recognized the men standing with her. The smile came easy to her lips.

“You came, too.”

“Wouldn’t have dreamt of staying back there,” Buccaneer said. “Now, come on, Miles is right. You need to get that checked out.”

“It barely touched me.”

“You’re bleeding,” Miles pointed out. “A bandage won’t do you any harm.”

They walked with her into the building, where a few Central men were still very much alive and already tied up, leaning on the wall. Miles took her to another room, where the Briggs doctor was tending to a few wounded on the floor.

Waiting for him to address her own scratch, she heard Buccaneer yell in a most inhuman way at the Central soldiers. She closed her eyes for a moment, exhausted.

The doctor’s fingers were easy on her. He cleaned her wound quickly as Miles stood with her, telling her what she had missed since Olivier and her had left the fort.

“You’re all set,” he said once he was done.

She and Miles returned to find Buccaneer slapping the general in charge of the operations center. He did not turn to meet their eye until the general’s face was red and bloated.

“These bastards will not talk…” Buccaneer grumbled.

“We’ll have to manage without their intel,” Miles said. “It’s not much farther from here to Central Command.”
“Ya think?” Buccaneer said. “Alright. The Curtis woman said to start attacking Central when we were ready so she could go through. Are we sending men in too?”

“Wait, you’re infiltrating the building?” Zinnia asked.

“We’re fighting for control over all gates,” Miles confirmed. Then, to Buccaneer: “North Gate said they needed backup.”

Buccaneer nodded at him.

“Let’s do that next, yeah.” He whistled all of a sudden. “Radio boy!”

He called and immediately a very young soldier, of an age with Austin, who was sitting at the radio station, headphones on, turned around.

“Captain?”

“Tell our shooters to stop for a minute, then resume it.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” the boy said and started working on it immediately, his mutters barely audible.

Buccaneer tapped his foot on the wooden floor of the room and pushed back his sleeve.

“I’m going in, Miles.”

His eyes fixed on Miles’ for too long, far too long. Zinnia took a few steps back to give them some privacy.

“It’s crazy,” Miles said, but his voice was much too weak to be convincing. He knew, as well as Zinnia did, that Buccaneer wouldn’t be talked into staying behind. “It’s chaos out there, you’ve seen it. And … it’s dangerous.”

“It’s dangerous for the shooters, for the men fighting over the gates,” Buccaneer said. “I won’t be like these cowards— He spat at the Central men. “—and stay safely behind. Not my style.”

Miles put a hand on his shoulder and smiled confidently.

“Then I’ll go with you,” he said. “Not my style, either.”

“We’ll take a radio,” Buccaneer said.

“And I’ll take a gun,” Zinnia said, reaching out for one close to the Central men. She had her knives for close-distance kills, but after what she had seen out there, something to use while taking cover might be useful, too.

Both Miles and Buccaneer blinked at her, not understanding.

“You need to stay here;” they both said at the same time.

“While Olivier is in there?” she said. “Not a chance. If these idiots don’t kill her, I will.”

Miles and Buccaneer shared a brief glance.

“She left you behind, didn’t she?” Buccaneer said.

“I’ve crossed the West Area to be here,” Zinnia added, and cocked her gun for effect. “Like hell I’m
sitting this out.”

In under fifteen minutes, they were all set. A few more men had joined this suicide mission, and they were all armed and ready to abandon the refuge of those four walls.

They marched at decent speed through the streets of Central, occasionally bringing down a soldier, and always on a lookout for the final sprint that would lead to the North Gate.

Zinnia looked around at the men that ran with her and tried to swallow her criticism of their numbers. If this was backup, she feared for the conditions the soldiers at the gate were enduring and would continue to endure.

There were few words exchanged until they got there. Miles and Buccaneer seemed to communicate without them as well as with them, and since they were the ones in charge, she let them be. She only cared about crossing that gate and finding Olivier. What she was to do once she found her was a story for another time and a decision to be made in the moment.

The crowd at the gate was homogeneous. She couldn’t tell, even as they got closer, who was who, and who fought for her same cause. All she heard was gunshots and swords clanking, and a rumble beneath it all, powerful and ghostly.

When their team finally joined the Briggs men at the gate, she understood what that sound was. The battle at North Gate did not have just two sides, Central against Briggs, but a third one. The legion, slow and steady, eating away at both sides. It was a particular war where occasionally Central and Briggs forgot to kill each other to try and kill those … things, those ghastly monstrous things that might have been born out of a human soul but now sported none.

She made good use of both gun and knives within her first seconds there. But she knew she wouldn’t last much longer. All her training hadn’t been for naught, but she was still severely underskilled.

“Stay behind me!” Buccaneer yelled as he jumped in front of her and crushed the skull of one of the legion soldiers with his automail. When the body fell lifeless on the floor, he turned to her. “You got to be more careful, kid.”

“I need to get inside!” she yelled back at him, slicing a jaw open with her knife. Green blood ran down her hand, sticky between her fingers. “I won’t be very helpful down here.”

“And how do you propose we do that? Fly you overboard?” Buccaneer chuckled loudly at his own joke, stomping down on a body that Zinnia no longer knew if it belonged to Central or the legion.

“Why not?” she said with a smirk, stabbing a Central officer when he came too close with his gun. “Send me over.”

“You’re fucking mental!” Buccaneer said. “You’ll break an ankle.”

“Have any better ideas?”

Two men came at her, and she slashed them across the chest, ducking so their arms wouldn’t touch her.

“I have a better idea!” Miles said, a few yards away. “We make an opening so she’ll run through.”

Buccaneer laughed again, as if he was in the tavern, enjoying some ale and good jokes.
“Lads!” he yelled for his soldiers to hear. “Hold these idiots for a second. Our Briggs lady needs to get in!”

In a matter of seconds, each creature and Central man was fighting a Briggs soldier, a serpentine but clear enough path in the crowd ready for her.

Buccaneer nodded encouragingly at her.

“Run!”

And she ran. And there were arms and legs and shoulders and the smell of gunpowder in the air, of blood and guts, of death. She ran through it as if it were smoke. And when she wanted to look back, the gate was behind her.

The legion spread all around her, scattered and slow, but moving towards anything living. She had to cut a few necks on her way, but she dashed along the corridors and turns of the military headquarters with a speed these loathsome creatures couldn’t replicate.

Her breath couldn’t catch up with her limbs, with the rapid thinking her brain did. She bust doors open, shot monsters, and still only ever found empty rooms and trails of greenish and red blood all around, like a grotesque painting on walls and ceilings alike.

Then the entire building shook for a moment, and she slammed her hurt shoulder against a corner.

But she knew to run towards the epicenter of it. Where there was something like that, there were people causing it. Or fighting it.

“Stay back! She and I are the ones he’s after!” said a voice just across the corridor. A voice she knew well, a voice proper of long afternoons sipping tea, not of a day such as this one.

A gentle voice for a gentle man.

“Alex…” Zinnia whispered to herself.

Perhaps he had found Olivier and would lead Zinnia to her now.

Perhaps—perhaps—perhaps—

She only had to follow the trail of legion soldiers sluggishly moving there, crossing a door that was in splinters, and bring a few down to enter the room that had made the whole place shake.

Her knives would have dropped from her hands if she hadn’t had them in such a tight grip.

Olivier … Olivier was on the floor. And she was bleeding. And she could well have been sleeping, her body curled softly against the hard floor, but Zinnia couldn’t lie to herself like that. Not today.

Alex was with her. He had found her, as promised.

And when he spotted Zinnia, he moved aside to let her do what he was about to.

Zinnia’s eyes were not full of rage now, rage at being abandoned, rage at what Olivier had meant to do. They were full of tears and they blurred her vision.

Gently, as Alex would have done, Zinnia picked Olivier up from the floor and looked at her, desperate for signs of life. A breath, a heartbeat. She couldn’t be dead, not when Zinnia had just arrived, not when she had gone through so much to get to her, to scream at her that she was a selfish
old woman with a death wish—

Zinnia’s tears made dark circles in Olivier’s bloody and yet still blue uniform.

“You weren’t supposed to fall like this…” Zinnia muttered.

She knew there were men fighting around her, she could hear the gunshots—it would be a while until she stopped hearing them, even if they weren’t actually happening. But she just … couldn’t pay attention to anything but the face she cradled in her arms. The face she loved, the face she’d wanted to die next to.

“It was supposed to be against Drachma, with me by your side… You would command from the shadows until enough men had fallen and you wouldn’t want to be the last one standing. But you still would have been. But you wouldn’t have been the last one to fall. I would have fallen right with you.” Zinnia wiped her snot with her hand. “You know I would have. All I wanted was to die with you. You can’t leave me before I leave you.”

You can’t leave me. How dare you leave me?

But Olivier didn’t move. Her eyes were closed, her body motionless.

And she may have looked like she was sleeping, but the pain in Zinnia’s ribcage knew very well that she was not.

She knew how to tell a fallen soldier from one alive.

Somewhere in her field of vision, Alex fell to his knees, crying.

“You can’t give up now, Major Armstrong!” someone said. “The fight still needs to be fought.”

With Olivier out of commission, what was the point? If she had always known she would die here and had been right to assume she would, what chance did any of them have?

They might as well fall with her.
What heaven looks like

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I must be dreaming…

She must be. There was a neck right before her, a neck that smelled just like she remembered and that tempted her like it always had. The neck of a lover, enticing even when it should not be.

If she had been to imagine heaven, it would have looked like this. Like a woman holding her.

“Zinnia…” a voice called. Deep and soft, like caramel. “Zinnia, we have to keep fighting. She would want us to.”

Zinnia? Zinnia… Zinnia!

She was not dreaming.

But she should have been.

“I won’t leave her behind.”

“She would want you safe, Zinnia.”

“I never did what she wanted…”

Oh, but such a lie that was. She knew this, she remembered. Bits and pieces, in bed, against a wall, surrounded by green and flowers. Zinnia had done all Olivier had secretly wanted and more. So much more.

If she had been to imagine heaven, it would have looked like that. Like a woman in her arms.

But this was not heaven, and it was not a dream. And Olivier was not dead.

“I still want you safe,” Olivier managed to mumble.

The world seemed to still in its entirety, then.

“I wanted you safe and you disobeyed me…” she continued.

The smell of tears reached her, and Olivier lifted a hand to cup the beautiful crying face above hers. A face with dark soft skin and big brown eyes, a face that smiled as if spring only ever brought kindness with it when it came. A face she had thought gone from her forever, safe somewhere secluded forever.

Zinnia, a flower in a desert.

“I live to disobey you,” Zinnia mumbled back. And she leaned towards Olivier’s, her lips barely brushing Olivier’s. They were wet and pillowy. Another kind of heaven entirely.

Somewhere behind them, Alex Armstrong took his first full breath since he had seen his sister fall and stood tall and mighty, hands stopping Sloth’s attack just in time.
Zinnia only had to see the two titans move to know what had caused the earthquake that had almost ended Olivier’s life.

“Harm her again and it will be the last time you have use of your hands!” she bellowed at the Homunculus.

She did not know if he was intelligent, she did not know if he had heard. She didn’t care.

Zinnia pulled out her gun again and aimed at the legion soldiers creeping in, always creeping in, now keeping soldiers in blue distracted. She managed to kill a few with her knives, too. They stuck deep into the white bodies. She did not go retrieve them. They would come to her, those bodies continuing to move towards her like a tidal wave.

Olivier stared at her like she was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, a deity born out of sea foam and dew.

“You’re a civilian…” she said feebly still. “You … you shouldn’t be here. You can’t … defend yourself.”

Zinnia stopped shooting for a second to look at her, almost telling her off with her eyes.

“I grew up in a butchery,” she said. “I know how to use a fucking knife.”

Olivier almost smiled.

“I would feel a lot better if you—”

To interrupt her, Zinnia made sure to aim well at the head of a legion soldier, startling the Central man that was currently fighting it.

“What were you saying?”

Olivier frowned and sighed. She had made it this far, hadn’t she? Unscathed. And she was the one holding Olivier like she might hold a damsel in distress. But Olivier was not a damsel, nor was she in distress. She knew how to recognize a woman who was in that category, and Zinnia was holding her ground well, proud and strong. Maybe, out of the two of them, Olivier was the one in more distress.

When Olivier spoke next, she sounded like a general again.

“Someone get this woman a sword!” she ordered the whole room at large. Someone in it must have used one, she hoped. She turned to Zinnia, shooting the last of her ammo with one hand as she held Olivier up with the other. “Help me up, flower girl.”

“You’re staying down,” Zinnia stated. “Alex! Tell her she’s sitting this one out.”

However serious she sounded, Olivier knew Zinnia was enjoying this, playing the role of the woman in charge, risking everything to save her. It was infuriating.

“I am not in much of a position to, I’m afraid!” Alex replied, his alchemy making strings of lights in the air until they hit the body of the Homunculus.

“You’re alone in this,” Olivier said. She pushed Zinnia’s arm away and tried to at least manage to sit on the floor.

Zinnia tried to humor her, until she saw the bleeding wounds on Olivier’s head and the way her right arm was all stiff and yet crooked. It looked … broken beyond repair, and it must have hurt more than
Zinnia was prepared to imagine. And even then … Olivier continued to insist she wanted to be up and fighting.

She would not die without a sword in her hand.

Zinnia saw it laying near them, but she didn’t grab it.

“I don’t even know how many places you’re bleeding from,” she said soothingly, trying to get Olivier to use her as walking support. “Just … sit down. I’ll sit down with you, here, and—”

“We’ll get slaughtered,” came Olivier’s response.

“At least you won’t faint from exhaustion while kicking ass and you can say you died a dignified death.”

“Beaten to a pulp by a Homunculus? Eaten to death by a legion of immortal ugly soldiers?”

“… point taken,” Zinnia agreed.

But Olivier didn’t move any further. She sank into Zinnia, and Zinnia sank into the floor, holding her up as best she could. They watched from the shelter of a half-fallen column how Central fought the Immortal Legion time and time again, but those soldiers rose and fell with impressive ease. Just like Sloth. Alex’s body was completely shining in sweat, and his breath echoed loud in the room’s ceiling. He kept hitting Sloth with alchemy and fist alike, but Sloth reconstructed any broken tissue almost instantly.

At some point, some Central soldiers got hold of one of Sloth’s chains and tried to hold him off. One of them yelled:

“Run while you can! This way, please, quickly.”

He was at the door, waiting.

Someone else ran close to Alex, too. They were trying to get them all to leave, to get to safety while they stayed to die.

“Major! Go, now!”

But it had been a long time since any of them had left a battle of their own volition.

“You would have me run away from this?” Alex roared softly. “The mere thought of fleeing, of leaving the battlefield in disgrace—I swear on my life such a thing will never happen again!”

“Alex…” Olivier called, much too softly to be heard.

Zinnia cradled Olivier in her arms again.

“Please,” she said. “Please, let’s go. We can’t stay here.”

“I won’t let these men die for me,” Olivier said very clearly. “I won’t let my brother die alone.” She shifted in Zinnia’s arms to look her in the eye. “But I won’t ask you to leave again either, even if I want you to.”

“Good,” Zinnia said, tears falling shamelessly down her face again. “Because I am not going to.”

Olivier merely nodded. Her brother prepared to take the full strength of Sloth, who the soldiers were
barely managing to hold back. The legion still moved towards them, now stopped by no one. And when Sloth moved, she and Zinnia would be in his way, right after Alex.

The chain snapped in half and all the Central men, in the momentum, fell to the floor.

Olivier looked at Zinnia. And in this moment, Zinnia understood it all, just like Miles had understood Buccaneer. Wordlessly, Olivier asked for permission. And since Zinnia knew how important it was for her to die with honor, fighting till the end, she answered wordlessly: Zinnia helped Olivier up, picked the Armstrong sword up and handed it to her.

*Thank you,* Olivier’s eyes said.

They closed, just like Zinnia’s did, when the whoosh of Sloth’s speed resounded deep within their hearts.

This time, there would be no escaping the darkness.

Zinnia’s hand found Olivier’s right in the end.

Olivier squeezed it past the pain of her broken bones.

If she had been to imagine heaven, it would have looked just like this. Like a woman’s hand in her own at the end of all things.

There was a sound, like a shoulder slamming on a wall, but louder—infinitely louder. And, then, footsteps.

“You refused to run,” a deep feminine voice said. “That’s impressive.”

“What?” was the question they all asked at the same time.

A woman had just stepped into the room out of what seemed to be a giant cement hand, and she had done so as if she were walking into her living room.

“Ah,” she said, upon seeing them, huddled together and only now begging to resume their usual standing positions. “You must be the indomitable General Armstrong from Briggs.”

The woman nodded amiably at her.

“That subordinate of yours—the one with the mohawk—he asked me to help you.” She turned, hands on her hips, to see the mess Sloth currently was, head stuck at a corner of the room. “I’d call that helping.”

“That man,” Olivier said, shaking her head. “Who asked him?”

“Thank you,” Alex said solemnly, dusting himself off the ground. “We would have most certainly perished without your assistance.”

“Nah,” the woman said. “You’re a fine man, you would have handled it well. But I got one who’s even finest.”

Sloth grumbled deep like the thunder and slowly stood once more.
“How many more times will I have to kill that thing?” Alex mumbled under his breath.

The woman smiled.

“How many more,” she said. Then, she yelled: “Honey!”

And a man the height of Alex and even wider than him came out as well from the giant cement hand. His arms were as big as tree trunks, they could have been able to crush anything without half an effort.

Alex’s jaw fell.

But there was not time for contemplation. When Sloth charged again, although he was prepared for attack, he didn’t need to. This woman and her husband were synchronized enough to pull a double attack on the creature and bring him down.

“Not bad for a housewife, huh?” the woman said, laughing.

Alex recognized alchemy in her hits, and despite the distinct lack of it in the man’s hand, he was most impressed. To have that kind of strength without any kind of genetic abnormality as was the case for Alex’s family…

It didn’t take long, as she had said, before the giant monster was breathless, tumbled over with half a dozen spikes going through his entire body. His skin seemed to be scaled now, and the more Alex looked, the more scales he found in it. Soon, that skin began to disintegrate. Then, the muscle tissue did. When the full skeleton, organs bared, of Sloth was visible, Alex’s eyes darted away.

The next time he looked, there was nothing but dust where the body of the creature had been seconds ago.

“So, there’s that,” the woman said, wiping her hands on her black leggings. She offered one for Olivier to shake, much too seductively to just be a simple handshake. “Name’s Izumi Curtis. And this is my husband, Sig.”

Olivier merely stared at him. She noticed that her brother was … staring too, quite intently, with the enubilated eyes of someone who had never seen anything more precious. It was an instant worth of a thousand books when both men, in their impeccable sizes, stood up to one another with utmost respect and began tensing their bodies for comparison and honor.

“I’m surrounded by idiots,” Olivier said to Zinnia.

Zinnia grinned like the fool she was at Alex’s full-on peacock display at the sight of Sig. “You’re surrounded by gayness,” she said. “You’re not exempt from it, either. Live a little.”

Olivier deadpanned: “I’m literally dying.”

Zinnia put a hand on her sternum. There was a heart still beating underneath fabric and skin and bone. She rubbed her forehead against Olivier’s.

“No, you’re not.”

But Olivier felt like she was. Much more than just a morning had passed, and the toll on her body had been greater than expected—greater than she was letting on.

Letting go of Zinnia’s arm, Olivier sat down on a piece of column and took a very deep breath, eyes
closed. The room had started to spin around her.

“I think I’m gonna need a moment…” she barely breathed out, her voice sickly and worn like it hadn’t been in years and years of excellent health. She almost lost herself in memories of her childhood, feverish and regal on a bed as her mother urged her to get out of the covers and read something. The sounds of the real world whirled around her for an instant, as if someone was playing them underwater.

The hand that suddenly came upon her shoulder, she did feel.

“Tell me the truth,” Alex’s voice said, still playful even though he’d had to sit down too. “Can you stand?”

“She can and she will, but she shouldn’t,” Zinnia muttered to herself.

Olivier threw back her head and supported her left hand on the hilt of her sword, its tip dug into the floor.

“Don’t ask stupid questions, Alex.”

She tried getting up and failed so abysmally that both Zinnia and Izumi had to take her arms. When Izumi grabbed her right one, Olivier flinched.

“You two are severely injured,” Izumi said, looking at Alex, who, although he may look forever strong, had streaks of blood covering his naked torso. “It wouldn’t hurt to stay back for a bit. Go to a hospital, even.” She stared at Olivier’s rigid arm, trying not to move it. “With a wound like yours, you won’t last much out here unattended.”

“There’s plenty of mannequins left,” Alex said. “They will have to be dealt with.”

“You’re not listening to me at all, are you?”

Alex beamed at Izumi.

“Do you not know who we are?” As if she needed any extra indications, he showed her one of his arms. “The Armstrongs never back down from a fight.”

Olivier fully stood unaided now, supporting herself on the sword. Zinnia tried with all her might not to help her, but she made sure to stand right behind her in case she fell.

“We’re adults,” she said. “We understand the risk this entails. But the weight of the world rests upon our shoulders now. We fight and die for the next generations to inherit it in better conditions. There is honor in sacrificing ourselves for that.”

Izumi nodded.

“Better us than some of the kiddos I’ve seen in blue today,” she said. “Mind if we join you, then? Someone will need to pull you back up when your strength falters.”

Alex smiled again, not at all taking it to be something meant to undermine him.

“Are you kidding? You and your husband seem almost invincible.” He actually bowed. “We will be honored.”

“Not for long, though,” Izumi said. “I’m marked down as one of Father’s sacrifices, so I hear. I plan on being the fuck away from here when shit goes down.”
“Shit, these creatures are doing most of our job for us,” said Buccaneer, unburying his sword from the inert body of a Central soldier.

They had killed in greater numbers than ever in the duration of this day. Soldiers and creatures alike, it was killing before dying, and Briggs was excellently trained at survival, at outlasting the rival. It was a nice change from the siege up north they had given up on to be here.

This unfortunate officer Buccaneer had slain had been the last one of many standing at the north gate. And if the radio communications were any good, he had received notice that a few more gates had been won over, too. Briggs was victorious, in the end.

Miles walked up behind him, following him like the trail of a star.

“Makes you wonder…” he said. “If they’re not a failed experiment.”

“Must be,” Buccaneer said. “Who in the right mind would create a living weapon that chases the enemy but also you? It’s nonsensical.”

“Alchemy,” Miles said. “A dangerous force to be reckoned with today.”

Zinnia didn’t let Olivier take two steps without sitting her down in some more or less quiet room and immobilizing her arm. She’d had to cut away the fabric covering it, only to find that the skin was bloodied and her forearm was torn inside out for a few inches. It must do more than just plainly hurt, and yet Olivier made no sound as Zinnia tried to bandage it up. She had a dark veil in her eyes, like a sadness thick as ink that kept spreading.

Alex and Sig stood guard outside the room, but Izumi had come in with them and watched in silence.

“I can try to heal that bone for you, general,” she offered. “It’s no trifle injury.”

“We’ve lost enough time as it is,” Olivier said.

Zinnia had barely just finished tying a knot right behind Olivier’s neck, to keep her arm elevated and stable. It wasn’t her best work, but she had never been much of a healer. Olivier should be taken to a doctor sooner than later, or there might be lasting consequences. And for a woman who lived for her sword, those didn’t seem like the best things to hope for. Still, Olivier didn’t seem to mind. She was hell-bent on keeping on moving, wiping every last legion soldier off the face of the earth, and recruiting all Central soldiers she saw.

“Your brother didn’t seem to think the same.”

On the way, Izumi had worked some alchemy on him, on a particularly difficult spot he couldn’t reach with his own.

Now, Olivier slit her eyes.

“My brother can well do as a pleases. I can walk on a broken arm.”

And many, many bruises. And a deep cut on her temple.
“Like this, I will last all day,” Olivier continued. “Enough worrying about me.”

“As if!” Zinnia said.

Izumi surveyed her for a few seconds, then just nodded.

“If you’re all set, then there’s no more time to lose.”

And even if that was an excuse, Izumi did well in assuming it as the truth. The legion still advanced, unvanquished, turned corners and bit off legs. It gave the five of them great pleasure to shoot them down, even if they got back up again, as they scourged the fortress free of them, one by one. The soldiers accompanying them barely had any spotlight in the fight, especially since Sig and Izumi were much fresher than the Armstrong siblings and Zinnia.

Most of the time, they swept legion mannequins off their feet, piling them in, tying them around one another. Their jaws were separated from their heads, so were their hands and feet. They didn’t regenerate, so this seemed to be the most logical way to incapacitate them, to have them creep around the building like snakes.

In this side of the command center, there was nothing but dozens of legion soldiers and the unstoppable force of Olivier’s team.

Until—

“You monsters were supposed to protect us!” Gunshots echoed nearby and the group moved quickly to find General Edison cowering in a corner, surrounded by white creatures and miserably waving a depleted gun at them. “You were meant to harm them, not us. We are the ones who give the orders, you’re the ones who follow. Why won’t you stay back?” Then— “I don’t wanna die, I don’t wanna die, please. Please…”

Izumi and Alex barely looked at each other before they conjured an explosion to drive the creatures away.

“General Edison,” Olivier announced herself with a tired smirk. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Ah, Armstrong!” he said, still shaking. “I—I didn’t expect to see … you here.”

“Didn’t you get the memo, Edison?” she said, her smirk growing. “I killed Fox and Gardner.”

Edison’s face sank.

“You—you did?”

“Who might be next in my list, I wonder?” she said, getting dangerously closer.

Zinnia tried to get to her.

“Olivier—”

“Shush!” she shut her up. “I need this.”

She was so close to Edison she could see the hairs in his nose and his stupid gray beard trembling like the whole of him was. So pathetic, so ruined. It should give her great pleasure to end this man’s life, too.

Instead, she punched him right in the gut until he rendered a wail so high-pitched humans could not
“Was this necessary?” Zinnia asked.

“No,” Olivier said. “But I’ve been meaning to do it since the day I laid eyes on him.”

She kicked his useless body limp.

“That’s enough, sister. We need to keep moving.”

She turned to the soldiers under her command.

“Restrain him,” she said. “We’re taking him with us.”

It was a long walk. Longer still with Edison’s whimpers following every step they took. But, finally, they made it somewhere interesting.

Olivier had once thirsted over this place, dreamed of what it would be like to sit on that chair, have a close circle of generals—all loyal to her and only to her—ready to execute anything on her command. She’d entertained fantasies about ruling Amestris in her youth, when all everyone thought her capable of was being a womanly nuisance.

Nothing farther from the truth, she thought as she caressed the velvet of the Führer’s throne. All the loyalty and power she had desired she had found in time, way up north, in a place where no one wished to go and everyone loved to stay.

She walked away from the chair.

The Immortal Legion hadn’t reached this room yet, everything was right where it should be. But this place was nothing but a giant target on whoever stood on it.

“Will you be taking command here, general?” asked a familiar voice behind her.

A voice from home.

Her heart almost leapt out of her chest, even if her expression remained neutral, when she turned around and found a good dozen of Briggs men standing right there, just out of the door.

“This room is nothing but a farce,” she only said. But, in the end, she smiled at her men.

“In that case,” one of them said. “We found something you might all want to see.”

Beneath a well-placed bookshelf that now was away from the wall, Briggs had uncovered a metal door, nothing particularly suspicious or striking except for the fact that this was the Führer’s throne room.

Olivier pushed the door open and darkness—wet darkness—received her.

“Should we send some men down to see where it leads?” her soldier asked.

“Nothing good can originate down there…” Izumi muttered.

Olivier stared down at the stairs, spiraling down farther than the eye could see. This must have been the escape for the Immortal Legion in either direction. It felt too easy a victory to have raided the place clean of them already, they must have gone somewhere. And who knew if that somewhere had access to the city?
“General, sir,” one of her men approached her with the radio. “Captain Buccaneer.”

She took the apparatus quickly and put it to her ear.

“Julian,” she said, “I was starting to think you’d been swallowed in by the rubble.”

“You wish, sir,” he said humorously. “We’ve been making progress. The north gate, east gate, and main gate are secured. So is the armory. There’s tanks on every entrance, and no Central scum in sight. We’re winning this.”

Olivier smiled.

“You have done it, then,” she said. “You have beaten them.”

“Sure we have, boss!”

She heard bouts of joy and fervor surrounding the captain. Her men had never been keen on celebration, because there had never been much to celebrate, and yet here they were. The soldiers at Briggs were neither bears nor extraordinary beings, they were just men. And all men liked to win a war.

And she, as her superior, liked to rain on their parade as much as the next one.

“Without my permission.”

The noise quietened and she could almost hear Buccaneer’s mouth forming an ‘oh’.

“About that, I—”

“Did you miss me?” a voice interrupted what would have surely been a momentous explanation, followed by her approval of their victory’s celebration. A voice old as time itself. A voice they all had thought buried in the sand, far east from here. “I am returned.”

Führer Bradley was back in town.

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Chapter End Notes

The title of last chapter is a reference to a BBC Merlin episode, *La morte d’Arthur*, in which Arthur doesn’t die :D (yes I just did that, I am evil, but in my defense I have to say there are many mentions of Olivier dying in that chapter and then she never dies, so…)

It is also nice to have it in French because her name is French <3 (I’m normally not on the best of terms with the French language, but today I will make a well-deserved exception)

Lastly, if anyone is a BBC Sherlock fan, you might have recognized Moriarty’s characteristic line right there in today's chapter XD
Chapter Notes

Captain Albert Alexander
Saved his crew from pirate slaughter
But that Captain Albert Alexander
He'll go down in the water
[…]
Just before he went down
He called out to his crew
“It's obvious that my time has come
I'll let this ending ensue
I've led an exciting nautical life, it would seem
And there's no better end than a death by the sea.”

Captain Albert Alexander,
by the wonderful Steam Powered Giraffe

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Boss?” Buccaneer said. “I'm gonna have to call you back.”

He hung up before Olivier could say anything.

Bradley was back. Somehow, he had survived his accident in the east and had managed to find quick enough transportation to be here now, at the heart of it all. A heart that refused to quit pumping blood, a heart that refused to give up just yet, on the cusp of a so-called victory.

Bradley, a sole man. But he had this glimmer in his eyes—red—that made Buccaneer of all people step back.

Briggs had a tank, they could use that against him. Because something in Bradley’s red eyes made Buccaneer realize that anything else wouldn’t even harm him.

He gave the order to move the metal beast, to have it face Bradley, but Bradley was too fast even for them and charged forward, sword first. The bodies of Buccaneer’s friends dropped on the ground like domino pieces, and he didn’t even have time to pick any of them up from there, hold them and give them a proper goodbye.

Bradley slashed at the tires of the tank and climbed atop it without anyone being able to stop him from throwing a grenade into its depths.

“Get back!” Buccaneer yelled at the rest of the men. They moved away in time, but it was too late for those inside the tank.

Bradley turned towards him, then, sword down, dripping in blood. He had the serene face of a man who is fully aware of what he is doing and will not stop even when begged to. This was not the leader Buccaneer had tried to respect as much as possible, within some logical limits. This was a murderer with a thirst to be quenched, and a whole army ahead of him to kill.
Sixty-one years Buccaneer had seen, and nothing like the red in Bradley’s eyes, murderous and intelligent. Cunning. Despicably cunning. If he had been anything but a man from Briggs, Buccaneer would have stepped out of Bradley’s way and taken the path of the cowards and survivors alike.

But he had loved those men dead in the grenade’s fire, dead by Bradley’s hand. He had known some of them for decades, others he had nurtured from baby boys into men of the north. And what an irony it was to have them be dead before their time with old Buccaneer still standing?

“On my command,” Buccaneer said through his teeth. “End the motherfucker.”

With his command, fire was rained down on Bradley. With his command, Buccaneer leapt all six plus feet of himself into the air and threw the best of his automail against Bradley’s chest.

And as he flew, slowly as a cloud, he caught sight of Bradley’s eyes. They glistened with knowledge, with spurning.

Buccaneer’s own eyes opened wide at the shock of a piercing blade through his stomach.

“Son of a bitch,” he said, breathless. But he still drove a fist into Bradley’s own stomach in retaliation and made the King of Amestris back away, almost fall on the dirt, now definitely away from his sword.

Buccaneer didn’t dare look at the sword. He felt it like a cold northern breeze in summer plunging deep into his loins. And he swallowed its presence, standing mightily. If he pressed on, he could almost forget he had been hurt.

If he kept fighting, perhaps this wound wouldn’t have happened.

If—if—

Don’t give up now, don’t fall asleep. What would Olivier say if he did? What would Miles say at the sight of him on the ground, bleeding and weak?

Julian! Their voices called. Don’t close your eyes.

“A little small for a soldier, aren’t ya, kiddo?”

Olivier had stared down at him even though he was significantly taller. She wore no medals then, just her permanent frown causing her skin to wrinkle prematurely and her long mane of Armstrong blond hair.

“Who let you join in with the men?”

Buccaneer chuckled boisterously, and so did those around him. They had closed a circle around the girl, like lions about to eat an antelope. They all wanted their share.

“Ah, there are men here?” she said, impassive. “I hadn’t noticed.”

At this, Buccaneer and his clique did not laugh.

“All I see is a bunch of children playing games,” Olivier continued. “And playing at war doesn’t mean you’ll win it.”
“What war do you expect to fight in, girl?” Buccaneer had said. He had been a second lieutenant at the time and thought very highly of himself. All those years at the wall, since it had been built, fresh and new like the houses of the south it hoped to defend. What was a city girl to him but a nuisance? A woman who spoke of playing at war and yet had ventured into a real one without knowing what it meant.

Olivier’s eyes had split at him, then. And slowly she had risen up to grab him by the neck of his uniform, lifting him off the snow without batting an eye.

“The war you’re too busy fooling around to, apparently,” she had said.

Get up, Julian, she said to him. Get up and win this.

Buccaneer smiled. She never would have said that. She would have dragged him out of there, put him somewhere safe, ordered some blankets for him, and then returned with a very good speech prepared to tell him off when he awoke.

Olivier… always saving me when you shouldn’t. Always saving others when you didn’t have to.

Miles had been a tree even at the beginning, tall and refined, spoke little and cared even less. His caring levels had diminished over the years regarding everything that entailed, as he called it, nonsense and nuisance. But he had had a fear to him that he didn’t have in the present.

He had held himself back on so many occasions, hidden beneath his goggles as if someone was going to murder him for not wearing them. He had quickly dismissed Buccaneer and his clique the very first few times they’d playfully asked about it.

“I am sensitive to light,” Miles had said. “And here up north it reflects harshly on the snow.”

They hadn’t left him alone, not really. But they’d taken that for an answer.

At least until Order 3066 had come from Central Command.

Olivier had made a show of shielding Miles from that order, not only baring him in front of herself but in front of the whole fort. She would not be keeping secrets from her men, and she expected them to keep them for her.

When Buccaneer had first seen Miles’s red eyes, he hadn’t known what to think, except that the world was very unfair to have a man stripped of his citizenship and individuality all because of a ruthless war that had no end. He had known him a little more then, knew Miles laughed easy at good jokes and even easier at bad ones, could tell when Miles was mulling and would always invite him over some cup of coffee on the coldest days of patrol—and Miles had let him do all that.

To have to protect him, alongside with the rest of the fort, was an honor. Miles deserved to stay here, fighting for the right causes, not half-naked in some cell until Bradley decided to kill him off.

Buccaneer had wondered, though, if Miles didn’t trust them all fully because they were on the winning side of the Ishval War or if he was just like that.
He wondered, too, if he would ever live to see that question answered.

But he hadn’t thought much of it at the time, then.

Don’t take the sword out, Miles whispered to him. You’ll bleed out.

But Miles wouldn’t have said that, Miles would have knelt and died with him.

Buccaneer opened his eyes to war. A war of three, Bradley at its center. Two Xingese men and an Amestrian leader, fallen in disgrace. And they were as much at a loss as Buccaneer had been.

Bradley was invincible. If a train crash hadn’t ended his life, nothing ever would. Nothing ever could. And the question was, what would Bradley do after he won this? Where would he move on to? Would he find Olivier? Would Olivier fight him till her death?

No one is dying here, her voice reassured him. Olivier’s voice had never been reassuring.

The younger Xingese man was suddenly kicked down by Bradley, his boot high atop the young man’s chest for a second until he moved away to deal with the older man.

It wasn’t a matched fight even if it looked it. The Xingese man fought quickly, bravely, but Bradley was better without a doubt. The man’s weapons slashed through the air time and time again, twirling and descending on Bradley, who soon enough used the man’s own knives against him, cutting him open in the chest. Bradley returned quickly to the Xingese youth.

The older man dropped to his knees near Buccaneer’s body.

“It didn’t work… I’m sorry,” he said to himself.

But that was not the last of it. The man fished two grenades out of his pocket and stood up again, fully shielding his kin with his body from the shrapnel and combustion.

Buccaneer’s breath seemed to slow down the earth.

These two men were protecting each other rather than fighting for victory over Bradley. Whatever ties bound them, Buccaneer understood them. He had ties too, voices in his head he would die for. But those voices should never die for him.

Struggling, he brought himself to one knee and rose.

Bradley was preoccupied fighting a bleeding, dying man and a shadow that wasn’t fast enough for him. Bradley didn’t notice as Buccaneer took the sword in his stomach in his hand, looked in the eyes of the old man for one second, and rammed the weapon through his body and Bradley’s.

The old man’s eyes met him again as he breathed his last. Thank you, they said.

“How do we shut down the legion?” Olivier asked.
They had beaten Edison into submission, but he still would not talk. He just mumbled words like ‘nerve’ and ‘insubordination’ and ‘treason’ until they hit him again.

“Edison, is it? Unless you want to lose a limb,” Izumi pitched in. “I would suggest talking now. For your own sake.”

The general refused to, still.

Olivier leaned back against a wall.

“Time for a little story, then,” she said. “About all the unspeakable truths you’ve kept hidden here for decades.”

Edison whimpered.

“That’s not—I don’t—”

“Well, that’s a start…” Zinnia said. “He speaks.”

Edison slithered towards her, trying to take her hands.

“Please, young lady. You’re—you’re not like these people. You … you understand, right? I had to.”

Zinnia scoffed so loud the soldiers outside should have been able to hear her.

“Redeem yourself or you’ll end up dead,” she only said. “I would suggest that you take that warning and act in consequence.”

Then, Olivier began speaking. Calmly, as ever. As if this had nothing to do with her, with all of their situation. She told them about everything she had begun to uncover up north, that plot the Elric brothers had helped make public. All while Edison cried in his mess, afraid of the repercussions. After all, some of the soldiers that were now under Olivier’s command had been his own. And they had not known what they were fighting for: a world purely reserved for the elite—for Central generals—and built out of the deaths they had hoped to plow out of today.

“Is it … is it true?” the soldiers asked Edison.

“Why wouldn’t it be true?! he yelled. “Wouldn’t you sacrifice everything to live forever, untouched by the scum of the earth?”

“You were sending us to our deaths!”

“And it would have served you well! You deserve nothing but to die for your superiors!”

Olivier kicked Edison in the ribs. It kept him silent for now.

“So now you know,” she told the soldiers from Central. “This is their doing. And if he won’t tell us how to shut down those creatures, with Bradley out there no amount of men from Briggs will be able to hold them in the building.”

There were solemn glances exchanged between soldiers, then. The Briggs soldiers at her side knew this already, they didn’t seem to be surprised at their Central counterparts not having been in the loop all this time. After all, their reputation preceded them.

“If you hadn’t so blindly followed his commands,” Olivier continued, “perhaps we could have gotten much more done than we have.”
The soldiers looked down, averting their eyes because they knew she was right.

Zinnia made good use of that moment to join hands with Olivier. She had been in the background for the most part now. As everything developed before her eyes, she had hoped to find some rage to use, something to bring forth for Olivier to deal with. But they were literally at the end of the world, the only explorers out to stop it, and it made no sense to be angry.

“We’ll just have to check out the tunnel,” she told Olivier in private, as Izumi dealt with Edison. “Kill them one by one.”

“I should kill him,” Olivier said tonelessly, not looking at Zinnia. “I should kill every last one of them.”

“And what good will it do, huh? You’ll just be like them,” Zinnia said.

Olivier smiled faintly.

“That’s never going to work with me,” she said. “I kill when I have to. And I have no problem with it. If you do, then—”

Zinnia squeezed at her hand.

“We’ve already had this conversation.”

“I recall you refusing to leave.”

“Still not going to.”

“General!” said the soldier with the radio. “It’s Operations.”

She quickly got to the phone. The situation had worsened. Apparently, Bradley had brought more troops with him, and that meant Briggs was outnumbered. It was bound to happen, Briggs had lost many numbers in the past months.

“Understood,” she said. “Get out of there if things get out of hand. Get out and leave me behind.”

Izumi cleared her throat. She was kneeling next to Edison’s unconscious body.

“If we go deep enough, I can make a tunnel. We could all escape,” she said. “There’s no point in searching the source for these legion monsters if we can’t shut them off.”

“And leave the city undefended?” Olivier criticized.

“I don’t mean to sound rude,” Izumi pointed out, “but I think you could use a breather at this point.” She rose and faced Olivier. They were almost at a height. “Let others defend the city. You’ve done more than enough, general.”

But Izumi was wrong. Olivier had done nothing. Killed and killed and struggled along. But she hadn’t stopped this, and it didn’t look like she might any time soon.

“I will continue to look for a way to deactivate them,” she said stubbornly. “The rest of my men can decide what they want to do for themselves.” For once, that ‘my’ also included those men from Central.

The talk about it carried until they were well into the tunnel. She heard them, muttering about duty and family, about ties so strong they were ready to piss on loyalty for. But she also heard them talk
about home. A city that would fall if they didn’t stand in it until the end.

Perhaps she had been quick to judge some of these Central men. Without the subjugation of their superiors, they had minds proper of a soldier from the north.

She walked with them to try and be the leader they hadn’t had, her own men last in the long queue towards the heart of the fortress. Zinnia and Alex walked right behind her, Izumi by her side, and Sig leading the way fearlessly.

“Well, this is boring as seven hells,” Izumi said, a while deep into the passageway already. “Don’t you men have entertaining ways to pass the time?”

Some of them said a very subtle no, most just shook their heads. They were soldiers, little else did they do aside from getting involved in international skirmishes they hadn’t signed up for and idly wait until their shifts were over. Those from Briggs, more used to coffee and gossip, said nothing. None of them had it in them to indulge in any of that now.

This silence, these few minutes of safety, of quiet... they were the best part of the day so far. Olivier was thankful that she could just climb down the stairs in silence and let time pass by.

“General,” Izumi said. “How is the arm?”

“I hardly feel it anymore.”

That was an outright lie, but it was delivered flawlessly. She could endure this for however long it took. And now she had no idea anymore of how much longer that would be. She had seen her death coming clear at her so many times in the past few hours, she now didn’t know whether she was meant to have fallen or there was still a special occasion reserved for her and her only.

The not knowing killed her with every breath that she took.

“Curtis,” Olivier said now. “I am curious about something.”

Izumi’s eyes opened wide. “Do tell.”

“What is your involvement in all of this? Why are you still here when you could have gone south, somewhere safe?”

Izumi and Sig both chuckled loudly, the way her brother Alex liked to.

“That,” she said, “is an awfully long story, General Armstrong. You would find it dull. Duller than this silence, anyway.”

Olivier frowned.

“Try me.”

So Izumi took a deep breath and listened for the tell-tale silence that took over everyone present for her story. It was indeed long, Olivier was able to find, and ever-twisting. But it brought some answers.

“Major, you’re an alchemist,” Izumi said at the end of it. “Can you elaborate on the alchemists’ one and only sin?”

He nodded somberly, his voice resounding in the darkness.
“Human transmutation. The one thing we are not allowed to do, the one thing there are very few records of having taken place in the last centuries.”

“And that’s where your wrong, major,” she said with a sad smile. “There are no records, but there are cases.” She turned to Olivier. “I was one of those cases. What I didn’t know was that this taboo brings forth a price. An equivalent price. An eye for an eye, a life for a life—”

“—and the world will go blind,” Olivier finished smugly. “Is this what happened to the Elric boys, too?”

Izumi nodded.

“I can tell what their price was,” Olivier continued. “May I ask what was yours?”

Izumi placed her hand on her stomach, reminiscing about the most painful days of her life. Full of things Olivier couldn’t even imagine, no matter how hard she tried to. Anything that was new to her attracted her like fire did a moth, but now she only felt this … coldness instead of the flickering flames inside her.

“I lost part of my insides and my ability to conceive. And then after sacrificing more than just a part of myself, I learned the truth. Human transmutation… It can’t even be performed.”

Another big lie, that was all human transmutation was. Like the military himself, like the country. The world Olivier knew had been built on lies, all of it. It didn’t surprise her to find out that the alchemists’ great taboo was nothing but a farce, a trickery.

For a moment, she felt sorry for Izumi, and for those boys who had traveled the country and faced countless threats to undo the evil done by alchemy. How old must they have been when their bodies had been stripped away? They were so young now… To bear that load from such an age, it had to have changed their lives forever.

There was only one reason a person might delve into the dark secrets of alchemy. The same reason countries went to war and lovers fought till death for one another, the same reason families broke into a million pieces like porcelain and nations mourned in solidarity after a cataclysm.

Someone.

Someone, hurt or dead.

Once upon a time, Olivier still remembered why her war had started. Why Drachma still fought. Why she had left home. Why she had lied to the people she loved. Now, all she felt was a hole in her heart where the concept of death used to roam free. It had finally escaped the walls of her heart.

She had pushed so many away, hoping that in doing so she would be saving their lives.

Today not even that had mattered. Her brother was here, Zinnia was here, her soldiers were all here. Facing death, fighting with her.

If one of them fell, if one of them fell before her, wouldn’t Olivier risk it all to find them again, living and breathing, standing right in front of her?

“So, then,” Olivier asked softly, “I take it there was somebody that you lost. And you wanted to see them again so badly that you risked opening the portal and losing your own body.”

Wouldn’t Olivier give up her voice, her hair, her strong arms? Wouldn’t she give up her entire body,
just like Alphonse Elric, and have her loved ones rise again?

All for a farce, but she would risk it. She would hope until the end that the rumors weren’t true.

*What a silly concept, hope. But look how it has returned to me,* she thought.

Izumi’s eyes fixed on hers.

“And what about you? Don’t you have someone that you feel that strongly about?”

*Yes,* Olivier thought. *Someone walking right behind her, lost in another conversation with someone else, letting Olivier have her peace and quiet. Someone who should not have been there, someone who should have been crying of rage in an empty house way west. Someone Olivier had almost died in the arms of and selfishly wished she wouldn’t have to see perish today.*

The panic swelled up in her throat like vomit. They were walking towards the heart of danger, alone and unaided, so far away from the surface that none of their cries for help would get anywhere. It was the purest darkness, the final form of doom. And Zinnia was *there.*

Her face must have conveyed it all perfectly, far better than she would in any words, in any period of time. All she had done to keep Zinnia away had failed, but she would keep trying until there was nothing left to do but succeed.

That woman would see the light of the new day, if Olivier had to die herself to ensure it. And Izumi... an alchemist without a uterus, a lone wolf, a powerful and knowledgeable traveler, understood. She understood because she had known Olivier for less than a day, but she had never seen her make the face she had now, not even when facing the Immortal Legion, not even with the pain of her arm having bitten off part of her life force.

It was the face of desperation. And Izumi knew very well how to speak that language.

Olivier breathed out for a full ten seconds, grateful, and nodded imperceptibly back to her.

Then, she performed as she should, as she had for weeks before sending Zinnia to the west. The show must always go on.

“That’s not really the kind of thing we soldiers think about,” Olivier said casually. “We don’t see any point in clinging to those who died, we only know how to fight to keep more from dying.”

And it was not a lie, was that not what she was doing?

Would she not force her soldiers into the tunnel when Izumi opened it?

Would she not stay back to guarantee their evacuation?

The floors came and went, sluggish, after that. At some point, Alex and Zinnia came closer to her, tried to get Olivier to talk about anything, but their efforts were fruitless. There was nothing to talk about. And if she had opened her mouth and said anything, she would have confessed. She would have leaned back against a wall and just asked them all to leave, to find somewhere safe to go and stay there. She would take care of this, she would cut down every last enemy this world had.

But she couldn’t do that. It wasn’t just her fight. She just had to let them be. The die had been cast anyway.

“Izumi,” Sig said after what felt like hours. “How much deeper for the tunnel?”
Izumi didn’t look at him, she looked at Olivier.

“There’s still some more floors to go. We’re too close.” But in her eyes Olivier saw the truth. It was time.

She almost held her breath, almost closed her eyes. But she remembered, that the war hadn’t stopped, that she was about to meet an almost inescapable fate. So Olivier forced herself to look, as Izumi opened the portal underneath Zinnia’s feet, almost caught up on the next step.

It happened so fast no words would have been able to come out. And yet Olivier saw, with utmost clarity, the look of betrayal in Zinnia’s eyes as the darkness swallowed her whole. That look she had engrained in her memory only some days ago, a lifetime away.

If that must be the last memory of Zinnia Olivier would take to her grave, so be it.

Nobody said anything after, only Olivier, eyes on Izumi: “Thank you.”

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“We’re running out of ammo!”

Buccaneer heard that, awkwardly spread out on the tile, bleeding. His men would not be able to hold on much longer like this. Without the tank, without guns... it would come down to hand-to-hand combat. And they didn’t have the numbers anymore.

He wanted to get up with the last of his strength, help defend his people before he fell. But he could hardly keep his eyes open.

“Mister!” someone said. “Mister! You did it. Bradley is down.”

“Huh?” Buccaneer managed to mumble. “I killed the bastard?”

“You did, you did…”

Buccaneer was able to focus his sight on a Xingese boy. He looked the same as the powerful man who had fought Bradley as well, only his features were softer.

“Thank you,” the boy continued. “I’m—I’m sorry, I can’t—there’s nothing I can do for you now.”

“You can,” Buccaneer rasped out. He sought the hand of the boy with his own. “Help Briggs. Help my men defend the gate. They can’t do it alone.”

“Okay, okay, I promise. I will.”

“Thank you, kid. Thank you…”

His eyes were beginning to close again. His chest felt shallow, like a reef that’s been emptied of water, burning hot underneath the sun. There were so many things wrong with that.

“Buccaneer!!!”

If Buccaneer had opened his eyes, he would have seen Miles in the distance, running towards him as if his life depended on it. He panted and he was sweaty and dirty from the exertions of the day, but none of that mattered when he had seen his friend on the floor, a red splotch in the middle of his chest.
Miles ran like he never had, not from himself, not from the Führer’s Order. He ran because he had to, because there was a man he loved lying on that tile, and Miles wouldn’t forgive himself in a lifetime if he didn’t get there in time.

He scraped his knees on the stone, but it didn’t matter. His strong arms picked Buccaneer up gently and lifted him. Miles wanted to look at him, to look at the face that had accompanied him all these years, through storm and sun, in the best and worst moments of their service at Briggs.

“Hey…” Miles muttered wetly, the tears catching on his lower lip. “Hey. You did good, huh?”

Buccaneer’s eyes were closed, but, true to his reputation, his ears never were.

“Miles?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s me.”

“The Xingese kid is gonna help…” Buccaneer could only mumble. “He’s gonna help you out. You will win.”

Miles sobbed.

“I don’t care. I don’t care about that… I need to get you to a doctor.”

Buccaneer’s hand found his own with a firmness that Miles would think for months he had dreamed.

“I’m a man of the north,” Buccaneer said, managing a smile, just the beginning of a smirk. “I know how to tell frostbite from hypothermia, Miles.”

Miles sniffed his tears in. He pulled Buccaneers head closer to his chest.

“No,” he sobbed. “You can’t say that. You don’t say that.”

Buccaneer patted his hand, then squeezed it reassuringly. In what world did a dying man comfort one that wasn’t? In theirs. In a world of years and years of memories, of tossing and turning, of tugs of war and gossip over coffee.

Buccaneer always had to come out on top, always had to do things better, know more. Today, Miles would have admitted that he did indeed do everything better, that he knew more than anyone else, and that he would always come out on top because he deserved to.

But he had no words. His face must have been covered in tears, yet his throat was dry.

“It’s alright,” Buccaneer said. “Miles—my friend Miles… It’ll be alright.”

Miles’s face contorted into a grimace that would have killed Buccaneer if he had seen it. Hell itself would have bowed before it, would have wept with him.

“What am I going to do without you?” Miles wailed.

Who would he do everything with?

Who would he love unconditionally every day of his life despite his very infinite flaws?

So many questions uttered in so very few words…

Buccaneer’s eyes opened to Miles’s face. A face he knew so well he could tell everything that hid
beneath it. Those eyes only a few had really seen, his long nose, and his pursed lips that only Buccaneer knew how to coax into laughing, into a tiny little tense smile that grew and grew all over his face.

Today he saw pain, and he saw grief, but he chose to focus on what would one day take all of that away. Miles’s strength, his courage, his vulnerability. His soul.

“Miles…” Buccaneer said to him slowly, carefully. In another world, he might have chosen funnier last words, but in this one he knew what he wanted to say and who he wanted to hear it. “Take care of them, take care of her for me, will you?” he said. At this, Miles just gave up. This couldn’t be happening, he couldn’t be saying goodbye. “And tell her… tell her I died in peace. Tell her I loved you all.” His eyes, saner now, livelier now, than they had ever been, pierced Miles’s. His hand squeezed his one last time. “I love you, Miles. Thank you… thank you…”

And, in a breath, in a heartbeat, Buccaneer left the sooty air of Central and rose towards a sky clearer and higher than the summits of the Briggs mountains. And Miles screamed so loudly he might have even heard him, too. He hoped, at least, that Buccaneer had.

“She won’t have any trouble getting out,” Izumi assured her gently. “If she’s smart, she’ll run outside the city.”

Olivier almost snorted and didn’t grace that with a proper reply. If she knew Zinnia at all, she knew by now that Zinnia wouldn’t just flee. Not when Olivier was still here. Whatever her goals were—to die with her, to save her—Zinnia would try to come back. And Olivier could only hope that she herself attracted all danger so Zinnia wouldn’t have to meet any.

“The little one will most assuredly try to make her way back,” Alex explained. “A tenacious one, she is.”

“Against that, I can’t do anything,” Izumi said. “Let’s hope she knows what’s good for her.”

“Let’s,” Olivier just said.

She tried not to think realistically about this, she tried to believe Zinnia would take the hint—finally—and just leave her there. But who was she kidding? She was well aware of what the circumstances were. But could she have lived with herself if she had let her stay? They were walking towards an inexorable destiny.

Every step downwards was a weight more on her chest, an uncertainty that grew bigger, and a second less of her allotted time. Today seemed as if it would never end. And she was starting to wish it did, quicker than slower, definitely.

Once again, there were no words to be said. Alex didn’t even try to cheer Olivier up. He, too, should have gone through that tunnel. But Alex was a trained soldier, an alchemist. He had defenses Zinnia never would. She could shoot, she could kick and punch, but could she have been able to survive Sloth on her own, Olivier wondered?

Weren’t they as likely to be walking into another, more dangerous Homunculus as they were not to?

When the lights bleeped unnaturally and the party stopped for a few seconds, fumbling in complete darkness, Sig broke the silence at last with hesitance.
“Izumi…”

Izumi sniffed the air and looked up at the staircase that ascended many floors into Central Command and the grounds covered in corpses from humans and monsters alike.

“Yeah, that’s our cue to get the hell out of here. We’re far enough down to dig an escape tunnel for all of us.”

“Wait!” said one of the soldiers behind Olivier, the one carrying the rope Edison was tied to. “We’re staying. We can’t turn our backs on this fight now.”

Olivier regarded these men with sadness, not pride. She would have liked to see them safely returning to their families, their homes. Today, however, was not about what she liked or didn’t like. War didn’t stop to ask questions and consider the answers. It took and reaped and sowed, and after it there was only a trail of destruction and silence.

“Are you sure about this?” Izumi asked. “I could take us all out. No one would judge you if you did. Today is not the day to be a hero.”

“You saved our lives and we are thankful for your help, but we must part ways,” Olivier said. She, too, however, addressed the soldiers. “Mrs. Curtis is right, that I will say. No one will judge you here and now. If you want to leave with them, for whatever reason, you’re welcome to.”

*No one will remember you leaving. No one will be alive at the end of the day to remember it.*

She clutched her arm as discreetly as possible without drawing attention to herself.

No one moved.

“We won’t abandon you, sir.” She looked up and saw that the man saying that wasn’t one of her soldiers from Briggs. It was someone from Central, who had heard rumors about her for years, and who upon meeting her had decided she wasn’t anything like those rumors painted her out to be.

If she had learned anything from today, it was that loyalty grew strong in places she would have never imagined it could. And she was glad for that.

“I see,” Izumi said with a smile. “I leave you in good hands, then.”

Olivier offered Izumi her left hand to shake. Izumi took it without hesitation, her grip firm and proud.

“Good luck, Curtis.

“Likewise, General Armstrong.”

And, in a heartbeat, a light came from beneath the concrete Izumi was stepping on. And it *opened*, like an eye, like a huge gray eye that saw it all.

“No…” Izumi muttered. “No, no, no.”

But it began drawing her in, piece by piece, cell by cell. Sig tried to reach out for her and Olivier didn’t let go, trusting that their handshake would keep the other woman anchored to this godforsaken place. But Izumi’s last recognizable facial features melted into the air and she disappeared as if she had never existed.
When her first full breath of air came, she thought she would choke. Not from the dirt she had inhaled or the smell of gunpowder in the air, but from grief.

Her hands nailed at the cobblestone as she struggled to breathe normally, chest heaving heavily, and hot tears came out of her eyes without her willing them to.

She was alive. She was alive and she wasn’t where she was supposed to be anymore. She had been betrayed a second time, and a second time she forgave. Because deep down she knew she would have done the same, made a deal with an alchemist all the same. If it meant—if it ensured Olivier’s survival the same way Olivier had tried to preserve hers.

Finally, Zinnia lay on her back and looked at the skies, darker now than ever, as the eclipse came to fully be. She could have run, as people were doing—flee from the horrors of Central, from this darkness that seemed to come upon them—but she had no desire left in her to run ever again. All her life she had run, and for what? She had ended up here anyway, in danger, alone. And without any more answers than questions.

This eclipse, after the things she had seen today, looked almost beautiful to her. Natural, at least. Something humankind could never stop even if they wanted to, something beyond the laws of society and alchemy. An event set in stone.

And Zinnia lay beneath it, like a cat underneath the sun. And she wondered if she would be in her right state of mind when the day was over, when dusk fell and the gunshots quietened and the dead would finally be given a burial, the wounded treatment. Would she be the former or the latter? Would Olivier be one or both?

The thought of the future was unbearable. Tears didn’t come to her eyes anymore, but now she wished that they did, so they would empty the spaces within her full of doubts and fear.

She had seen the end of the world and stood a step before the abyss began, and yet now, at her safest, she felt afraid. Not for others, not in the way that she should, but for herself.

Because there were some deaths she would never be able to process. And her own wasn’t even on the list.

The same breath the air had returned to her minutes ago was struck violently out of her lungs when the eclipse finally was at its zenith. At first, she thought it was this grief, this desperation. But when people began to fall around her, clutching their throats, gasping for air, Zinnia understood.

She understood everything. Olivier would die today, and despite her having done her best to keep Zinnia from dying too, she would as well.

And she shed silent tears as she choked, her vision slowly blurring until there was nothing to be seen. The end had come for all of Amestris, swiftly and surely, as once and many times over it had been prophesied.

The darkness fell, and Miles was grateful for it. He wouldn’t see the blood like this.

He had not moved an inch, he had not stopped clutching Buccaneer’s dead hand. And he did not plan to. The battle had gone on before him, many good men he had known perishing at the hands of Central, and Miles had remained where he was, unable and unwilling to fight.
There was nothing to fight for.

No light, no sun, no jokes to pass the time, no smiles.

No company, no gossip, no insolence.

No Buccaneer.

Miles had nothing left to fight for. He had fled his land when the first indices of war had become known, he had trained to be a soldier to put a stop to them when the time came, and when the time had come he had had to hide underneath the safe skirts of Olivier Armstrong, because if he had stepped out of her reach he would have been killed for the color of his skin, the color of his eyes, and his real name. He’d always fought for something during those years of undeserved protection: his land, his home, his people, his friends, his life. Until now.

Until death had made its way into that life he had fought for, and taken a life he had followed all the way to Central.

The sky was dark, and the war hadn’t stopped. Miles hugged Buccaneer’s lifeless body and he didn’t weep anymore. When the breath was stolen from his lungs, he was almost thankful.

*I will see him again,* he thought to himself. And he smiled.

“I can see a door,” Alex said, but there was no excitement in his voice. They all knew what awaited behind it.

Underneath the ground, none of them had a way to measure time. None of them knew how long it had been since Izumi had disintegrated, since Sig had taken the lead of this suicidal expedition and vowed to die only if he had found her first. Alex had backed him up, that special glimmer in his eyes, and Olivier had said nothing. Who was to deny a poor man a last delirious wish when the world was ending and they were here?

She had no way to measure how long it had been since she had seen Zinnia for the last time either. No way to know how much longer she would have to bear the weight and burden of that memory, until the sweet release of death took it away—took everything away.

And she would die fighting. And whatever heaven was out there, she hoped it smelled like snow and pillows.

“We’ll find her, Sig,” Olivier told the man her brother couldn’t keep his eyes off. “They can’t have sent her anywhere but here.”

That meant the kids would also be there, somewhere. So many things waited in that hypothetical somewhere, she was almost eager to see.

“Watch where you’re going, men,” she said to the soldiers.

From then on, the lights were minimal.

They flickered once more, harder than before, and then the whole world went quiet. Olivier’s breath was frozen in midair. And she would have though it the shock of the emotions she had kept well at bay, if she didn’t know better.
She had known. She had known Central had aces to play.

And yet she had still come here.

Olivier held tight to the handrail as if that would shock her lungs into breathing again, but like everyone else—Alex, her soldiers, General Edison, Sig—she fell all the same.

She had come here to die.

And she finally was.

Chapter End Notes

So, it’s finally happened. I’ve been keeping this a secret for over a year and a half now… (Although I’m sure my intentions were at least a little bit deducible, and that’s being kind on my lying skills, I am aware XD).

From the very beginning, I’ve always known Buccaneer had to go, even if I never knew why. And to tell you the truth, I looked forward to writing this chapter for a very, very long time, although I love Buccaneer with all my nerd heart. But, of course, as soon as I had to sit down and write it … I felt in my own skin the grief I was going to put a few other characters through, and the sadness struck. As he died, I listened to Come Josephine In My Flying Machine from the movie Titanic—a fitting song, I think.

And so is the one I quoted in the notes above, in a way. It’s one of my top 10# favorite songs in the world, and it was by listening to it on a loop that I found a bit of a connection with old Captain Julian Buccaneer. ( Seriously, go check SPG out, they changed my life—and they have new music out and an album on the works for next year, too.)

As for the rest of the chapter, (*ehem ehem* those last few lines *ehem ehem*) I can’t say anything else until next week!
“Olivier?” Alex’s voice called, but it seemed to be very far away, somewhere she couldn’t see or pinpoint. “Olivier!”

She blinked and the light she saw dimmed a little more. A distinct humanly shape was before her, shirtless and bloody. She hadn’t expected to see anything else ever again. If this was a version of the afterlife, why was Alex receiving her into it?

But as she came to her senses, the pain returning to her body, she was made aware of how this could not be any sort of post-mortem sanctuary.

“No, Olivia.” Her brother’s voice was full of relief this time. “You were the last to wake up.”

Wake up? From what?

She sat up a little and exhaled deeply. One quick look grounded her back beneath the many floors of Central Command, at the very end of the underground stairs. Half a hundred faces were staring down at her compassionately.

“What happened?” she asked Alex.

“I’m not entirely sure.”

“Something’s not right…” she muttered. Nothing of the sort should have happened this soon, none of the battles had been settled for good. Her men were still defending their positions somewhere, didn’t they? “They took their sacrifices and now this?”

“We must keep moving.” Alex urged. “Sig needs to find his wife and—”

Olivier glared at him. They both knew there was no finding Izumi without finding someone else that was much more dangerous and wouldn’t hesitate to have them killed. This time for sure.

“Come on, then,” she said. “There’s nowhere to go but forwards, isn’t that right?” She gave a little laugh at that. Such had been the optimistic quotes people had thrown at her her entire life. Optimism was for fools who sat comfortably in their living rooms, drinking lukewarm tea and reading the papers. For people like her, with blood on their hands in both the literal and figurative way, the choice remained to pay little attention to that. Just taking steps in a specific direction in the battlefield didn’t mean anything. Nothing at all. It only meant that at some point you’d be caught in enemy or friend fire and die out there in the open.

Was this friend or enemy fire? Was this blackout meant to help or to ruin them further? Trapped in that tunnel, answers would never come to them. So forward they should continue to move, until meeting any fire at all would be confirmation that they were arriving somewhere.

Whether it was to kill white beasts, to die at the hands of an all-powerful being, or to simply stare as the world was finally and utterly destroyed, forward it should be.

A gasp in the middle of nowhere roused them all.
“Repeat that!”

It was one of the soldiers with a radio.

He turned to Olivier.

“General, sir, there’s contact.”

“Ask them about Curtis.”

The man listened intently to what he was being told on the line. At some point, his face paled considerably and he lowered his eyes. When he hung up, the silence that had spread could have drowned whales.

“Well?” Olivier snapped. “What is it?”

“It’s—it’s Buccaneer and some of his men… They fought Bradley at the main gate.”

Olivier could have died proud right then, if she hadn’t known deep in her gut that the sentence didn’t end there. She would have prayed to gods she didn’t believe in for the utterance to be done, for all the information to have been delivered. But the world was no fairy tale, and it spared no one of its gory days, of its cruelty.

“They’ve all been killed, sir.”

She nodded. She could just nod.

But her mind flashbacked to different days, days when she had a very loud and abrasive man living in her midst who she needed to find a home for. What a chaos it had been, convincing that man that retirement was not only his duty to accept but an honor to receive, a medal of good service—of excellent service. Most soldiers, in times like these, didn’t get to see themselves retire. It was a truth Olivier hadn’t doubted to hurl at him on more than one occasion, that he should be proud of himself for having made it that far.

And hadn’t she not pulled him out of dangerous patrols, kept him off the edge of the fort, put him up to drawing maps and counting items? All with a sly smile on her face, knowing he wouldn’t see war again, knowing he would kindly see the last day of his service under her command without another scratch. A missing arm was scratch enough for a lifetime.

It had almost been a game, keeping that man alive and happy despite all the limitations Olivier put on him like a seatbelt. She had enjoyed it, every last day of it, because she had known that that little game would be the reason one day Buccaneer could live out the rest of his days in some wooden house by a mountain, only a few miles off the fort. He could have tended an orchard and migrated south with the nearby towns in the winter, or come take shelter for some time with his ex-brothers. He would have been welcome at the fort from time to time, mostly to scare off the newbies, and, truthfully so, Olivier would remember what it was like to lead through love, with support at her side.

To have all of that swept out of her reach into an abyss without a bottom was equal to having her heart clawed out of her rib cage. No breath came to her for a moment, no blood reached her brain to say anything.

She nodded. She could only just nod. She couldn’t even cry.

One of her best men, one of her best and only friends, was dead and she couldn’t shed a tear in mourning, in his memory. She could have laughed, dryly and madly, at herself. At her lack of
emotional capabilities.

“Captain Buccaneer, he—” continued the soldier. “He inflicted a mortal wound on Bradley, aided by men of Xing. They say—they say he died with a smile on his face.”

“King Bradley?” Edison said. “One of your savages has managed to kill him? It’s … impossible, it’s outrageous, it’s—”

They never got to find out what it was; Olivier made sure to slap his face into a wall to shut him up.

“Let’s go,” she said, her voice lifeless. “And muzzle this Central dog.”

Before they got moving, Alex put a hand on her shoulder and he said nothing, but she knew what he meant by it. For a second, she thought about pushing him away. She had shown too much weakness for a day. But when she paid close attention to the reactions of her men, to the tears running down their cheeks as if a star had went out in the sky, she knew this could not be weakness.

Olivier allowed herself a few moments with her brother. He didn’t pull her into his arms, because he doubted she would welcome that, but he did get very close to her, lowered his head down so he could press his forehead against hers, and they took a breath together.

“Okay?” he muttered.

“Okay, Alex. It’s okay, I’m okay.”

“Good,” he said, smiling. “We need to find Izumi.”

Olivier smiled, too.

“Yeah…”

They never would, but it was a nice thought, wasn’t it? Making that their final endeavor, when others would be most undoable, after all. Killing a horde of unkillable men? Getting out alive of the epicenter of this endless, merciless war? At least this was something easier to realize, something that in the scheme of things wasn’t as unreachable.

When Olivier lost the war, she wouldn’t feel as bad about having lost Izumi Curtis. When she fell, in a way not quite similar to how she had always imagined she would go, getting lost in the underground of a fortress with her brother and her men wouldn’t seem that bad of an ending. All things ended, in truth and in fact.

Maybe they would take her body out of the rumble one day, when this was all over, and whoever had won might have the decency to send her remains north, where she belonged.

Nowhere else but north, her north. Her Briggs. Home to no one but the Ice Queen and her loyal soldiers. Even those that weren’t loyal to her.

Sig… this man had entrusted her and her men with the task of finding his wife, above all things. Who was Olivier to deny him this courtesy?

In the end, she got used to the walking, to the sounds of their feet against the concrete and their breaths breaking the silence. No one had anything to say, or they simply didn’t want to speak, just like her. What words would do this place, this situation justice? Olivier had seen war, she had war in her eyes and veins, and this outdid everything else she might have ever been witness to.
The wars up north had been child play compared to the pain, to the losses, and to the sacrifices Central had brought upon them. Buccaneer was dead and gone with many more of the men he had dragged south with him to save her, Zinnia was somewhere around the city alone and unprotected and furious, and none of the people in this godforsaken tunnel had any chances of survival.

The ceilings might collapse, the air might grow unbreathable, whatever they found could challenge them to a last fight, and they might as well just give in from exhaustion. Some of the breaths Olivier heard, her own included, seemed on the verge of collapse.

She contemplated the span of her years now that they were at an end, all the things she had let change her when she was the sole captain of her life. How foolish of her to ever think the reins of anything were hers but a bunch of old wanna-be immortal men’s.

Would she ever have endured her mother’s tenacity if she had known? Would she have enlisted? Wouldn’t she have run away to some small town with Ianthe? Would she have taken command of a fort? Would she have thought the same of her brother’s desertion?

If she had known, would she have come here?

You fool, she told herself. You knew and you are still here. War is the language you speak, death is but a clause in it. You’re no stranger to it, but you are a stranger to defeat. And that was what ailed her. Death in victory was honorable, but perishing while failing to protect what she had vowed to brought dishonor and shame upon her memory.

At one point, she merely stopped walking. There were no answers to anything, were there? No fate interwoven so perfectly she might see hers in a knitted pattern. There was only the now—a cold, dry and dark tunnel that smelled like pestilence, a wound on her arm and a bruise on her ribs, and the smallest army behind her back.

A rough hand placed itself on her shoulder.

“Well must go on,” Alex’s voice said, sad. And why he would be sad, Olivier had no idea until she remembered he had worked for Central dutifully all these years, had made friends out of many of the dead men Briggs had killed. “Do you need me to carry you?”

In different circumstances, she would have scolded him for that. But Alex was no thoughtless boy anymore. His words had weight.

Instead, Olivier smiled—sad, too.

“My legs are strong, thank you,” she said.

But are you, sister? His eyes said. Are you strong enough to go on? And she knew that had he asked that question, he wouldn’t have meant it about her body but her mind.

No amount of training ever prepared any of the Armstrong siblings for this day.

“Well must go on,” he repeated, gentler this time.

“Take the lead,” she told him. “Do it for Sig. You are good with words; reassure him everything will be okay.”

Alex stared at her for a moment, unsure.

“But—”
Hope might be a dangerous weapon, she thought. But, after all, it is a double-edged one. With the same sharpness that you might cut an enemy down you might choose to end your own life.

And they were walking into their deaths, hopeful.

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s no need to call me that now,” she muttered. No one heard her.

Two grotesque creatures turned their gigantic heads towards the door the Briggs soldiers had just brought down. A third waiting in the semi-darkness of the destroyed room.

“Hold it! Don’t move, we’ve got you!” yelled the soldiers.

“Don’t shoot,” Olivier commanded, having spotted the third creature. “Come into the light.”

“Major Armstrong?” came the voice of a woman in the darkness.

“Lieutenant Hawkeye?!”

“Alex?” Olivier asked.

“It’s Riza Hawkeye, sir. Colonel Mustang’s second-in-command, if you may.”

“Do you hold her captive?” Olivier asked the creature breathing heavily, slowly in the dark.

Then, he came into the light, carrying Riza in his arms. A man with sideburns whose facial expression mildly resembled a gorilla, just like the other two looked like a toad and a boar in human bodies.

“You’ve been hurt!” Alex gasped.

And the sound of his gasp was overridden by a gust of fire and wind and a man being propelled by it, upwards through the broken ceiling into the light of the day and the open battlefield that was Central Command.

“What on earth was that?” Olivier asked.

“He came from below,” Alex said to his sister. “Did you see it?”

Carefully, Olivier stepped closer to the eye and peeked at the hole beneath her feet. The blackness of it was so thick she couldn’t make out a single shape. It must go down miles and miles.

Then, just the faintest lights.

And rumble, as if millions of trees were moving in the midst of a hurricane.

Someone yanked her back, far from the edge, right when a gigantic hand bearing Mustang and Izumi emerged from the darkness.

Olivier barely had time to understand when Sig, a man tall and wide as an ancient tree, leapt into the giant alchemical platform to join hands with his wife. She heard Alex sigh behind her and Izumi pushing her own husband away in the name of not reuniting properly until this was won.
She looked at Olivier for one second, wise beyond her years, and used alchemy to elevate herself the same way Father had just seconds ago.

“Well,” Alex said, “at least our numbers have increased.”

Olivier was tempted to elbow him.

Beside them, there was a proper reunion as Izumi hadn’t been able to accept for herself. Olivier tried to pay no mind to an almost weeping Mustang confessing to Riza how he had lost his eyesight, but it was impossible. He was loud as he had always been, and seeing him in such a vulnerable state got through to her. Was this how she looked to others, too? Was she a maimed soldier who couldn’t stand her ground anymore, kneeling on the floor begging someone else to stay safe?

She almost snorted.

Then a blinding light filtered through.

Olivier’s eyes watered at first, then they just hurt, as if they had been charged with electricity. She tried to shield herself with her hands, but then she found she needed them to cling to someone when the ground started to shake and the ceiling did too.

“What is happening?” someone screamed.

It lasted but a moment, and in a heartbeat the shaking was subdued and the light had disappeared. But there was a noise in all of their hearts that sung old songs of war and destruction.

The ceiling, though, hadn’t survived this motion, whatever it had been. Large portions of it were beginning to peel off of it and falling around them.

“Everyone,” Alex said in his booming voice, “gather around. I will propel us upwards towards safety.”

He managed to sound so commanding and strong Olivier almost lay down right where she was and let him take over. But she was no weakling and no coward. The strength of all the generations before her ran inside her veins, pumped the blood in her heart, and had gotten her where she was. Defeat might come, but it would catch her standing, a sword in her hand.

When her brother was sure everyone was close enough, he lifted them into the air like a puppeteer. The hole through the ground came in useful for this.

A few stories flew past them, then someone called.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

Alex’s alchemy ceased to move them upward.

One of the chimeras seemed to recognize he who had asked a question of them.

“Greed!”

Another Homunculus! Olivier thought, sword at the ready.

But she dropped her hand back at her side when she saw the expression of the man before them. Xingese… Buccaneer’s last moment had been spent fighting Bradley alongside men from Xing.

Only a Homunculus could have fought off another Homunculus and be left standing without a
“scratch on him."

“How about a ride, huh?” the Homunculus named Greed said. “You could use a guy who knows what’s going on.”

“Sure, we could,” Olivier said calmly. “But first how about you explain what is going on up there?” Greed gritted his teeth.

“Well, let me see…” His face shifted from utter pensiveness to rage. “Oh, you know, the Father of the Homunculi is going berserk above our heads while we wait here for a resolution! So, anyone who can still fight, with me!” He didn’t seem to be expecting an answer to any of that, not even a reaction, he just inspected the crowd before him and yelled again. “The frog dude and the two women, you’re out!”

“Excuse me?” Olivier said between her teeth. “I still have men out there under my command, if you think for just one minute that I will let anyone else—”

“Gods, you’re thick! This is no time to get your panties in a bunch over who leads who!” Greed said.

She clenched her jaw so hard she thought it might break in half, all in the name of refraining from unleashing the rage coursing through her in front of this … creature.

“I’m not taking orders from—” she began.

“General!” said one of her soldiers.

It took a brief reminder of how she still had dignity to turn back to face that soldier.

“A message for you, sir. From headquarters,” he said.

She tried not to yank the radio out of his grasp too furiously.

“Operations, come in,” she said. “What’s happening?”

Her men in the Operations Center did not speak, but the line was not taken over by silence. A roar, a sound of rocks colliding and worlds ending, came at her ears.

“It’s the Central Command center,” they finally said. “Half of it has been blown up. We can’t contact the north gate.”

That must have been the light, the explosion, the earthquake. Something had to have moved enough energy for that, and this only meant they were in grave danger. Probably more than ever before.

But, despite knowing this would be used to discredit her, Olivier did not plan on backing down. And she knew her men and her brother wouldn’t either. They had had plenty of chances to already.

Greed chose this moment to speak again.

“Father caused this,” he said calmly. “You see the power he has? Within him hides a philosopher stone powered by thousands of people. He has claimed the powers of god for himself.” He gave a weak laugh. If the stories were true, the Father of the Homunculi was the very same reason Greed was standing before them now. And yet Greed decided to stand with them, not his creator. Only a man with convictions would choose to leave behind his so-called family to fight with men, women, and nonbinary soldiers he didn’t know, on the way to an uncertain but very certainly bleak fate. “Any ordinary human that’s not at their best should leave now. Including you, General Armstrong.”
“My men are still fighting. I will not just abandon my forces.”

One of her men tapped at Olivier’s shoulder once more.

“General, it’s headquarters again.”

“What is it?” she snapped over the radio.

And she knew the second she had that she shouldn’t have.

“Don’t worry about us, sir,” they told her.

Ah, they were trying to convince her, too. All these years, Olivier had wanted to believe their loyalty was bound to the battlefield, that it would disintegrate and evaporate like smoke ascending to the universe once the ties of war were torn in half. Even when Buccaneer and Miles had fought against her to find her a happy ending, she hadn’t wanted to think otherwise. A man’s loyalties lie with his loved ones, with his family, with his people. Not with a commanding officer, no matter how good they were at commanding respect as well as ordering.

“Have you forgotten who we are? We Briggs soldiers are trained to respond instantly as one force to any threat,” they told her. “Even without you.”

Olivier had known, because it was her duty to, that she was the metaphorical head of the body Briggs was. But, physically, she was a fingernail. Removing her from the whole would cause pain and disorder, but the body itself could keep moving, could keep on attacking as needed. A fingernail could not give orders.

And yet here she was, removed from them and a part of them still. A fingernail they had stitched back onto the finger it had been detached from. Because they loved her, she realized. It wasn’t just loyalty, it might never have been just loyalty.

None of her men had run.

A man didn’t run head-first into their deaths just because of loyalty. They might fight because of it, they might act with it was their guidance, but in the moment of truth their minds would still urge them to run and stay safe, not walk through this for her. For one woman they didn’t even need to operate as a powerful force.

“From what I hear, you’ve been injured,” they told her. “Please, general, stay and wait where you are.”

They loved her, these men loved her. They were willing to fight for her. They were willing to fight for her without her.

She hung up, put the radio on the capable hands of her brother. She didn’t need to say more. In this gesture, she meant to erase away decades of damaging his self-worth and to reassure him of his capabilities. She was saying she loved him, too. Just like she loved her troops, who she allowed to carry on without her. She was allowing Alex to carry on without her too. She was telling him he was capable, she was telling him she trusted him with this.

And she knew he had been needing it for far too long.

Olivier placed her hand on her brother’s upper arm.

“Win at any cost,” she said.
Alex nodded solemnly.

“You take care of yourself.”

After they were gone, Olivier walked away from the group. Her heart pounded at the thought that she had come this far to miss it all in the end, but reason told her she had done well in staying back. This put a damper on dying in battle, though. It put a damper on dying in general. And she should have been happy about that. Whatever few men she had managed to force to stay behind with her wouldn’t die either. It must have been a cause for joy, for celebration even. Yet her brother had gone to war.

How ironic, to have the once deserter of Ishval rise to meet the Father of the Homunculi. As an alchemist, she supposed he was qualified for it. He wasn’t, as Greed had put it, an ordinary human like her. Perhaps if she had been at her best, she might have argued. But she was one arm short of being able to fight, and she was hellbent on pushing past the pain that had taken all over the body some long time ago. Pain would never be anything for an Armstrong, she repeated like a mantra in her head.

She walked a few paces into the darkness only ever interrupted by some feeble rays of sunlight. And she saw death itself. And it, too, was cause for celebration.

Olivier recognized the body at once, even if his hair and beard were grey instead of black and he was wearing none of the military insignia he should have been.

The Führer of Amestris, also known as the Homunculus Wrath, lay dead on the floors of the gutter.

She approached him quietly.

So this is how the most powerful man of Amestris had ceased to be? Bloody and breathless in some abandoned sewer. One, looking at him, might not have imagined the atrocities he had unleashed, the horrors he had let loose, and the people he had killed.

Olivier stared at his remains for a long time. He was almost… peaceful in death, like a different man. All the violence and cunning had been stripped away from his face. This was just a dead man, she thought. Meat and bones, no longer filled with a soul and thoughts. No longer capable of harming anyone.

She knelt by the corpse.

And she remembered words that seemed to have been spoken a long, long time ago. Captain Buccaneer inflicted a mortal wound on Bradley. Despite herself, Olivier smiled sweetly. The captain’s legacy was this, an army that had saved the capital once and struggled to do it again, a rescue that had come when Olivier hadn’t been able to wish for it, and a death that symbolized the end of a dictatorship. Of all war.

Julian, she thought. Is this how I will remember you now? In fleeting moments? Where has your boisterous presence gone?

If he had been here, he would have been boasting indeed that he had killed Bradley. And Olivier would have pretended to be annoyed. In her memories now, she was never annoyed at him. She couldn’t be, in retrospect. He had died fighting her fight, without her by his side to protect him.

But he had died killing.

“Like I always told you, Bradley,” Olivier said solemnly. Let this serve as your epitaph, Julian.
Zinnia woke up on the floor, covered in ash. The noise had woken her. A noise that by now should have been more than familiar to her. War, in the flesh, just yards away from her. In the heart of the capital.

She didn’t know what was going on. If her friends were dead or alive. If she was alive herself. But she figured that if she had died, she would have awakened into a different setting, an afterlife, not an exact replica of the word she had seen before closing her eyes forever.

The gunfight in the distance meant, at least, that there were still enough men from both sides to still fight. When she rose, she tried to walk towards it. The streets were bare now, almost silent. Those with a head on their shoulders had hid in their homes, those who had nothing left to lose were fighting recklessly for the last breath of their lives to be one drawn in freedom.

Mustang must have already found his way inside, Zinnia thought. Otherwise there would still be troops everywhere looking for him. And Briggs had seemingly concentrated all of their forces on each gate to the building.

Rising slowly, Zinnia thought she might do the same. Join them, at least. Be useful in the only way she could. She glanced up at the Central Command center, a noble structure if she had ever seen one. So well-defended, too, one might have thought conquering it was impossible. Today had proven to be the day that broke records and turned the impossible into a new reality. Perhaps Briggs would keep it to themselves when this ended. Whoever was left standing after this chaos deserved to rule over the ruins left behind.

She dragged her feet as she moved, but at least she was capable of moving still. Two knives safely strapped to her legs were her only weapon against hordes of white demons and legions of trained men. But she wouldn’t stay behind, safe where the rest of her people weren’t. What kind of a friend was she to let them make this choice for her?

What kind of a woman would she be if she just walked back into the streets of Central City, got on a train and left forever? After all, this had been her superpower since she remembered. Running, faster and further than anyone else, until she was a grain of sand in a beach. And no matter how much this had defined her, her feet continued to take steps in the wrong direction. Not back to safety but back into danger.

She didn’t get very far.

Light. Everywhere. Come out of nowhere, bound to stay. Brighter than anything she had ever been witness to on Earth. Zinnia tried to shield her eyes with her forearms, but it still penetrated, almost phasing through her skin and bone.

She thought it might never end and she would be forced to live the rest of her days without seeing the light of day again when it finally receded, and in doing so she was able to locate its source. Where else but at the heart of the country, at the heart of Central itself?

Something old, something dangerous had been let loose there.

Something she had no name for and could only identify by the shivers that went down her spine.

What had the power to do something like this? What would choose to? To bring this much pain to
one nation, to destroy what was so precious to so many, to rupture the holiness of a new season coming to be?

The same that had created seven souls out of death, the same that had butchered many more in the name of god and immortality. An old soul that once had been something like human. Not anymore. Nothing human would be capable of this massacre, of the massacres that had created this land-locked country of Amestris over the years.

Zinnia walked towards it. Towards that soul-sucking energy that had gambled with so many lives over the centuries. But she didn’t near the battleground at the east gate.

That was when the second wave of evil rose in a rumble louder than all the thunder of the ages combined. First her eyes, now she covered her ears in the hope to muffle it. But she felt it in her heart as well, in the mouth of her stomach, in her knees.

She looked up. The eclipse above her head was almost receding now.

And when she looked down, falling to the ground as it shook, Central Command had been almost entirely obliterated.

Something old, something dangerous, something evil.

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*My men are up there,* Olivier reminded herself, grinding her teeth so hard she feared she would chip one of them eventually. Her men were doing their duty, and she was playing the part of a damsel in distress who had been carefully laid down on some rock to sit down and wait for the heroes to win the battles.

Not that long ago, she had been a hero, too. She had carried her gun proudly to kill those who opposed her own people, and she had used it wisely.

She glanced at her broken arm, a useless thing now. With it still functioning, she might have been allowed to climb on her brother’s alchemic platform into the real war. The one war.

Olivier knew they were fighting the Father of the Homunculi in a last attempt to thwart his plans. Nothing before this had ever mattered, none of the deaths in order to stop the Immortal Legion and the Central forces had counted for anything. All that might have been a success for Briggs, but at the end of the day if Father won, if he amassed all fifty million souls of Amestris, everything would be over. And no control of the gates, no pile of cadavers would ever change that.

And her men, loyal and hard-working men who loved her, were fighting this last and only war. She heard their rifles firing, she heard their bellows. And she could only hope.

Her, hoping. On such a day.

And yet she couldn’t help it.

The sky was darker by the minute, the noise never ceased, and she counted heartbeats. Each of them was a failure, each of them was a fallen man under her command. Each of them was a reminder that she was here and they were gone.

*Gone, gone, gone.*
Gone differently but gone all the same. And where would Miles be, she wondered. And where would young Austin find himself? With a bullet dug into his ribcage? A bite mark on his blood-dripping neck? And was Zinnia even alive? Had she been captured, had she been stabbed? Was she angrily roaming the streets of Central, waiting for the fire to end?

As Olivier waited for it too.

The sky darkened, the moon’s shadow eclipsing the sun, and the noise heightened until Olivier could only count her heartbeats by the drumming motion of her heart in her chest.

Alex is up there, too, she thought when the blinding light came again, when a force beam of a power she could never understand tried to smash the remaining opposing soldiers into smithereens. She couldn’t see it, only a fraction of what happened in range of the hole, but she could hear it. And felt the terror of not knowing. The guilt of the survivor.

If she lived and Alex died, what would she have left? When her parents and sister returned to the capital, they would end her if nothing had killed her already. She would die on her own from grief, from regret. From pride. Because this war he hadn’t abandoned. And the only one that he had, he’d left because of principles. Alex Armstrong deserved to live.

Edward Elric, Alphonse Elric, Izumi Curtis… So many names Olivier would have prayed for if she had believed in anything. They were all battling a god, perhaps she should have learned to believe, standing there underneath the war.

She turned a deaf ear to Edison’s whimpering, and when she did, she realized the noise had died down and silence had taken over. As if the entire city had gone into slumber. Smoke rose into the air, she could see from the overture of the hole. But it wasn’t smoke from a fire.

It was white.

And just as the city had quietened, it breathed again.

“Is… is it over, sir?” some man from Central asked. It was the one who had handled Edison all this time, she noted for the first time now.

Olivier stared at him emptily for quite a few seconds, then she glanced at the portion of the sky that was visible. It was blue, again. Bright blue.

The eclipse had ended.

“I think it is, yes."

The war had ended.

Olivier was alive.

But who was dead?

There were some cheers from the men who had stayed behind with her, but they didn’t last very long. She looked at them all, men she had helped become who they were today, men she had taken in and commanded as well as she had known. Men who had survived.

They should pay tribute to those that hadn’t.

“Go to the main gate and find Captain Buccaneer,” she said, her voice devoid of any emotion. “Take
his body to my estate.”

They nodded and left into the tunnel again, not to be seen again.

Perhaps it was cruel of her to have preferences, to have a favorite. But if she hadn’t allowed herself to be open about this before, his death was an occasion that merited it. She only wished he could have known.

*Julian,* she thought. *I never said a word about it, but I loved you.*

She had loved him like a son, despite him being twenty-five years her senior, and she would mourn him like a son. A mother had her preferences between her son and someone else’s. A mother would honor them.

Olivier would arrange for all of the funerals, anyway.

Alone, because Zinnia would never want to be in the same room with her ever again. Alone if she must. Alone. Hadn’t she always felt alone?

In spite of the pain, in spite of her exhaustion, Olivier stood to her feet and felt her way around the tunnels until she reached the surface. A spectacle of utmost cruelty awaited her there. She took it all in without blinking.

The corpses lay across the grounds of what had once been a proud building like flies on a bed net. Some were missing limbs, some were simply dead from a bullet wound, and some had bled out after an explosion.

The living were in no better state. She saw them all, breathing heavily, together like brothers and sisters. Like kin. The Elrics, both in their human bodies. Mustang and Riza, embracing. The Curtis family hugging the Elrics. The Xingese girl. Alex…

So he was alive, then. She smiled, approving. Her parents would be proud of him, as they should, and Catherine would make up little stories about how her older brother had won a war. Her smile faded, then, realizing she would have no place in those stories. No place at all.

In the distance, too, she watched her men celebrate and hug each other. Victors, they were. Victors of a war they weren’t supposed to know about. They had come south for her, to defend her honor and her life, and they had succeeded. And yet she wasn’t there with them, as she hadn’t fought with them when it had mattered. This victory was theirs and theirs alone.

A column of them moved towards her. Olivier didn’t try to hide anywhere. She was their commanding officer, she would do her duty. When they came close, she saw they weren’t just walking in that fashion. They were carrying a body.

Buccaneer.

Old big Buccaneer, who would have retired this year. Who would have met his happy ending, his death of man somewhere nice in the mountains, free from his duties.

His face was pale and bloody, Olivier noticed. But he had a smile on it. And his eyes were closed.

“General,” called the wrecked voice of one of her own. She looked up and found Miles, clutching to one side of the improvised cot where the captain’s body lay inert. She understood now why she hadn’t been able to recognize him.
If Buccaneer’s face looked peaceful in death, Miles’s displayed an utmost state of devastation. As if someone had opened his chest with a chainsaw and cut out his heart before his very eyes.

But the column of soldiers didn’t stop, and Olivier didn’t find any words in her patched throat to console Miles. Even if she had had any at all, she wasn’t sure she would have spoken up. Miles deserved better than she could give.

Miles deserved better than this emptiness.

Her men took Buccaneer away and something within her unlocked. She would never see him again, never again meet those beady eyes and share his jokes and his bread, order him around when he was bothersome, or strive to keep him away from ale and danger alike. She would never have him enter her office without knocking, bearing a smile as wide as the wall and as dangerous. Buccaneer was gone.

For one moment, Olivier wished with all her heart to run after her men, to take a last look at that face she loved so much. A face that had always made days a little more bearable, a face that had welcomed every last soul into the fort without reservations. The face of a man who was good, a man who was better than any other person at Briggs.

She wished to chase his ghost until the end of time, until earth turned flat and didn’t let her run any further. Instead, Olivier tightened her fists as they took him away from her for eternity. Instead, Olivier cried. *These tears are for you, captain. No one will ever know they were shed but you.* Buccaneer would have liked that, she believed.

Buccaneer, who now looked ever so peaceful and quiet in death he didn’t resemble at all the energy and nerve he had shown in life. Buccaneer, who she would always remember as loud and happy.

All she had now left of old times were these memories. And they weighted heavy. Her chest was under so much weight now.

“Sister,” Alex said, and Olivier knew he was about to approach. He no longer had any business cheering the Elric brothers in the distance. “I didn’t think I’d find you here.”

“I couldn’t stay down there,” she said. “I don’t work well in the rear.”

Alex stared at her. There were things in his eyes she couldn’t comprehend.

“I know you would have liked to fight,” he said. “But, as the Homunculus said, this was no battle for an ordinary human. You would have been butchered.” His eyes glimmered with unshed tears. “And I do not think I would have been able to bear it, Olivier.”

She bit her lip, tuning out her desire to confess she wouldn’t have been able to stand it either if he had fallen. Not him, too. To reassure herself that he hadn’t, she took his hands in her own uninjured one. Such big hands… and still so very soft, despite having held weapons and conjured deadly artifacts from nothing.

“You should head for the hospital now,” he said. “Someone needs to take care of that arm of yours.”

She frowned.

“You’re not coming?”

Aside from the blood covering his torso, now he had ash and dirt clinging to his skin as well.
“There are still plenty of wounded and … dead to be recovered,” Alex said. “I intend to lend my hand in recovering them all.”

She stared at him firmly.

“So will I, then.”

“It is not wise—”

“There is no place for wisdom today, is there?” she said in defiance.

He didn’t speak up after that and just left after a courteous nod.

She couldn’t bring herself to move. She should have followed, but she was rooted to this very spot, in the dirt and ash of the shattered stones that once had covered the ground beneath her feet.

We won. Then why does it feel like I have lost everything?

Too many names lost. Too many battles lost. Night come, Olivier would still remember them all. She would still remember how useless her actions had been. She would not be able to forget what she had done, who she had betrayed. Who she had willingly abandoned.

Zinnia had once said she would not leave Olivier, no matter how many people she had killed and would still kill. But in having cast her away, Olivier was sure Zinnia had made the right choice and disappeared into the crowds.

With a soundless sob, Olivier bent the knee on the hard stones and tried not to faint.

She was alone now. Truly, heartbreakingly alone. In having had everything she had wanted but the death she had made herself want, she had been left alone again.

The war is won. So much was lost to win it, it almost feels as it is not over yet.

Zinnia wouldn’t come back, a very long way away from Central and from her. Miles had had his heart ripped out of his chest. Buccaneer had had a sword pierce his. And Olivier hadn’t been allowed to leave in any way.

She should have fallen so many times today… and yet here she stood. Alive, alone. Why? If she believed in god, she would have begged for mercy. For whoever watched over the mortals of this earth to finally allow her to have some peace, to close her eyes for her and let her rest.

It turned out the only thing she had taught herself to want, to deserve, she could not get. She would gladly trade herself for any of the dead. She might still live, but her life as she had known it was over.

A soldier wouldn’t have felt the way she did, a soldier would simply push through it as they should. But Olivier was now more woman than soldier, and she felt more than she had thought she could feel. She was aware of the pain in the various spots her bones had shattered, she could no longer ignore the iron-heavy weight on her chest, on every limb of her body. She could no longer stay upright.

Even when she fell, her eyes remained open.

Please, she begged to whoever might be listening. God or mortal, little did it matter. Please take me away, she would have said if she had any voice left.
Before her was the immensity of the blue sky and blank canvas of it. No white cloud tainted that blue.

Once, Olivier had sat alone on the ice and snow of the top of Fort Briggs, thinking her men gone because of her choices. She had come there so often that last winter, hiding from life and from taking any more choices. She had reflected on many things, then.

Buccaneer once had asked why.

*I like the winters up here,* she had told him. *Everything’s black and white. I appreciate the pure simplicity of it.*

*That’s not true, sir,* he had replied wisely. *You can see blue if you look up.*

Perhaps there was still a place for wisdom in this battlefield, after all.

Blue, all that blue. It never ended, it never faltered, there was no gradient to it, no splotch, no scratch. It was infinitely blue. Nothing like the blue of the uniform she wore, nothing like the icy blue of her eyes.

This blue was something else, but what it was exactly she wasn’t able to say.

At some point, she felt hands lifting her towards that blue. She thought she might grow to touch it. But she was finally left to lie on a flat surface, something neither soft nor hard, and her vision—overwhelmed still by so much blue—caught sight of men dressed in blurry white uniforms. Their faces, she never saw.

“You can rest now, General Armstrong,” they said. But whether they had actually spoken or she had imagined them doing that, she would never know.

Blue gave way to black.

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Chapter End Notes

Small intermission between heavy chapters to recommend a book, regarding the quote “no fate interwoven so perfectly she might see hers in a knitted pattern”. It’s called *The Legend of the Wandering King* and I read it many, many years ago when I was still a kid. It greatly intrigued me because of its take on the notion of predictable futures and the future in general as a concept, which in some ways could fit into the narrative of Adversity, if you stretch it a little. IDK it’s a very short, sweet read, and maybe the rec will interest someone, who knows? :D

It was originally written in Spanish, so if anyone speaks Spanish, I’ll leave a link to that, too.
Dead or alive

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Someone was crying. Somewhere, far away, the sobs of a child echoed all over the street. The rawness of it got through to one’s heart. The purity of tears, of a sound like this. Wars tended to be so loud that the smallest of noises went unnoticed underneath the clash of swords and the grumble of the fire. It was Zinnia’s first sign that it was over, that distinct and distant crying.

The columns of smoke continued to spiral upwards and the soldiers still crowded every entrance to Central Command, but there was a quiet to it now, a feeling of relief. There was silence. As if everyone had fallen dead on the ground, following orders they couldn’t hear.

Zinnia had no idea what lay behind this silence, what sort of magic or evil had caused it. She could only keep looking at the building, half in ruins now, and try to spot anything in the torn fragments of the wall that surrounded it. Central Command was built like a fortress of olden times, it even had a moat. She thought it proper, since it had just withstood a siege. But the castle had been raided already, and many had given their lives to penetrate its walls. And this silence meant that one of the sides fighting for its control had been defeated.

She would have thought defeat had a different ring to it, but even she had to admit it was fitting, to meet someone’s else victory by lowering one’s eyes and keeping silent.

Wars are cruel, Zinnia thought. They had removed her from her one true home, they had forced Olivier to act in manners Zinnia considered unthinkable, they had tainted the last days of her freedom, and they had ended cruelly in the same morning. Wars were as cruel as she viewed them to be, but they were just in their own ways. At least they had an end, at least they took lives without betting on either side. The cruelty of war rested on its impartiality. What made them just, made them cruel.

This one was over. And Zinnia couldn’t ask herself who had won. She didn’t care. She only cared about finding her own people again. If she ran towards Central Command, perhaps eventually she would run into Buccaneer or Miles or Austin or some other man from Briggs and she might walk with them to wherever they were allowed to. Maybe they would be heading home after this, to patch their wounds and tend to their injured. She longed for that home.

Now, in a deserted street where not that long ago Central had opened fire on sight, Zinnia could only wish for her Briggs back. For the wind and the snow, for hard mattress and terrible food and worse coffee. For the company of friends. For the company of the woman who had betrayed her without blinking.

That, she tried not to wish for.

Olivier was somewhere in there, dead or alive. If her desires had been procured, then Zinnia would find her body, lifeless and finally at peace. And what an image that was to behold that it made Zinnia feel nothing but rage. Rage that Olivier had wanted it in the first place and that she had allowed for no one to walk that path with her.

But I am your fisherman, Zinnia thought. I will let you lure me under the sea. I will let you drown me.
And yet the war was over and those who had to die were already dead.

Soon, the crying Zinnia heard turned into a chorus of voices, some rising above smoke and fire alike, some just wailing loudly at the sky, begging for the mercy that now would never come. Wars were cruel even after they ended, they left marks on people’s skins and hearts.

“Central has fallen!” some other voice called from the remaining parts of the Central Command building. “Central has fallen!”

Some heard and some didn’t. Zinnia merely nodded at the new information. So now she knew, Briggs was victorious. At what cost, she wondered.

The closer she walked to the moat, to the gates that Briggs had stoically won and defended, the more screams she heard from the balconies and windows of the houses around it. The rich lived in two areas of the city, the very center of it and the suburbs. Some of the cries Zinnia’s ears picked up were from lords and ladies, trapped in their homes, having been witness to carnage without being able to stop it. Not that they would have known how.

Some of those people made it onto the streets. These elites had family in the forces of vanquished Central that they now could run to at last, in safety.

As Zinnia walked past a mother clinging to the body of her dying son, she heard the woman’s sobs. And her heart froze for a moment. It was a scene that would be repeated many times today. There were many bodies.

On the pavement of the streets, floating in the moat, and inside. Bodies wearing white and blue alike. Zinnia didn’t look at them. She couldn’t. She knew some of those men, she had laughed with them, she had drunk with them, she had sung with them. They were part of the home she longed for, that home that now had forever ceased to exist as it was in her memory.

For a moment, she felt like wailing, too.

But she just walked faster.

She needed to find Olivier, she needed to scream at her, dead or alive. If alive, her wrath would match Wrath’s himself. If dead, it would be mournful rage, the kind that lasts for years.

But Zinnia had come to Central to intertwine her fate with Olivier’s. And no human or deity could stop her. Not fully, not in the sense that mattered.

Crowds began to pool around Central Command. Military and civilians alike knelt by the people they had lost, and some soldiers stood by the gates, keeping them closed still. Zinnia tried to approach the main gate first.

She cursed her height once she saw herself surrounded by taller men.

“Anyone have a radio?” she asked as loudly as she could, trying to push past them. Either wearing blue or white, some of them shook their heads at her.

“Try Operations,” someone told her. “There should still be someone there.”

“There’s no one left. The radios stopped working.”

After that, they went back to ignoring her. They seemed to be working on piling the rubble and sweeping most of it to the sides, so people could eventually walk in or out the fate without trouble.
“I need to find General Armstrong!” she tried again, raising her voice a little. “Have any of you seen her?”

“Last we heard,” someone said. “She was underground.”

A shovel was given to her so suddenly she almost dropped it.

A pair of gravely eyes stared into hers. He wore blue. And he had the face of someone who had seen too much in too little time. Zinnia noticed he had a cut on his cheek.

“Help us out,” he said. “When the radios work again, we will ask for the general.”

She tried to give him the shovel back.

“I can’t stay, I need to find her.”

“Look, kid, there’s nothing else we can do for you.”

“Have you seen her brother, Major Armstrong?”

He looked at her only for a moment before he set out to work again. None of them made eye contact after that, they kept working mindlessly, their muscles tired and their souls frazzled.

Zinnia almost got her knives out, made a scene out of this. But these people had seen as much as she had, even more than that. They all had their aftermaths to deal with.

She took the shovel and began to move chunks of wall to the main pile on one side of the gate. Her eyes were never on the gray pieces before her but around, always looking out at the space around her in case she spotted something. There were crowds outside of the main building as well, but no one moved individually. No one led. They all followed something that had no words, that gave no command. They wanted their city back, she realized. This was the home they wished for.

When the radios started working again an hour later, Zinnia’s forehead was covered in sweat, her hair plastered to it, and she had more stains in her already worn enough clothes to make the color of them seem different.

A soldier from Briggs sought her out personally. She recognized him. They had shared a shift now and then. He had been one of the first to spread foul gossip about her in her first few days in the fort, and later on he had been one of the few that laughed at the jokes she mumbled to herself while freezing her butt off in the snow. His eyes were kind for her now as she was cast aside for a moment.

“I got it to work again,” he told her. “I don’t know how much longer it will hold. Do you know how to use it?”

She nodded. On one of those occasions when she had fled from previous jobs, Olivier had put her up to cleaning them. She knew enough to try and contact someone.

“Thank you,” Zinnia remembered to say before she tried to work the radio.

The static almost burned her ears at first, until she adjusted the channels enough. She got through to a few men, but none of them knew anything about either Armstrong sibling. They all had seen either one of them in the past hours, but couldn’t pinpoint their location. After her last conversation, Zinnia understood that there was a man in every gate with a radio. When she tried a fourth time, there was only static again. She imagined it was Operations, where it would take longer to fix all the apparatuses after what the soldiers were calling the blackout.
“Are you about done?” the man from before asked her.

“I’ll try once more,” she said.

“Don’t be long—”

“—Armstrong, at the medical tent—”

“Alex???”

“Little one!” Alex’s pitch went through the roof. “What a pleasant surprise it is! How very lovely indeed to find you are well!”

“I’ve been asking for you everywhere but no one knew anything,” Zinnia said, almost laughing with giddiness. “I’m so glad you’re alive, too. Where is your sister?”

That seemed to make his good humor deflate.

“Where are you?” Zinnia pressed on. “I can’t find Olivier, I—”

Alex seemed to find his voice at last.

“I—at the entrance of the building. Or what used to be. There is a medical tent,” he said. “Where are you?”

“Main gate with soldiers from Briggs and Central,” Zinnia said in a hurry. “Listen, I’m going where you are. Don’t move from there. I don’t know where Olivier is, I need to find her.”

“She’s not here,” Alex said, and he sounded distraught. “But I saw her not long ago.”

Zinnia’s exhale must have been audible all the way from the north. That had to mean Olivier was alive, didn’t it? At least when Alex had seen her, she was. And how many minutes had it been since? How many more injuries had she endured?

“She’s … she’s probably more hurt than before. I—I don’t know if—”

“Mrs. Erwin,” Alex said calmly. “I’m helping out with the survivors. Come and we’ll… we will see what can be done, yes?”

She nodded, realizing after he couldn’t see her, but the line was dead already. She handed the device to the man waiting patiently beside her.

“The general was alive not long ago,” she told him. But Alex had asked her to come and wait until they found her, like one of the many survivors he was tending to. Or one of the dead.

Zinnia didn’t think she would finally have the stomach for mournful rage.

“If I find her,” she said. “I will have someone notify you of … the state she’s in.”

“Thank you, Zinnia,” he replied. “And good luck…”

She left at a run. These men would manage. They always had.

As she’d been told, a structure was being erected before what had used to be the entrance to the building, now a concave tunnel that opened to the sky above. Several beds and cots had been dragged to the site, and some of them were already being occupied by men that now wore no
uniform but the beige of the band-aids.

Alex Armstrong, ever shirtless, was amidst the fallen rubble, helping pick stone after stone to free those who had been trapped beneath it. He carefully dropped the large rock he had been helping tow away to approach her.

She almost didn’t see the giant hole in the floor that gave way to what seemed to be miles of darkness, and Alex had to get a hold of her and keep her from falling.

“What the hell happened here?”

“A battle,” he said, serious, looking at the interior of the hole. “A ferocious battle between humanity and a god.”

For some reason, she felt that much more than just something this oversimplified had taken place here today, but she didn’t press it.

She glanced up at what remained of Central Command. It was the last place in this godforsaken city she had not been able to look in so far.

“I’m going in.” Her decisiveness took Alex aback.

“Wait,” he said. “If she is still around the area, she’ll be in the rubble with her team, helping.”

“But you haven’t seen her, have you?”

“I must admit I have not for a while, no. I urged her to take herself to a hospital and have lost sight of her since.”

“Weren’t you with her till the end?”

“We got separated as I volunteered to help here. She went with some of her men.”

“I was just with some of her men. None of them have seen her either.”

Alex put both of his hands delicately on her shoulders.

“We will find her,” he said. “She is alive, somewhere. I can tell. She wouldn’t give up so easily, especially not now that victory is hers.”

Zinnia gave out a weak nervous laugh. Victory was probably the last of Olivier’s concerns right now.

“At this point I don’t think she’d be given a choice.”

“Maybe she has been taken to the hospital, little one. If she has fared better than these poor souls,” he said, pointing at the few people on the cots, hurting, “she will most likely be there.”

“Come with me, then,” she said, desperate. She couldn’t do this alone, not without someone who held her back, who reminded her what Olivier had gone through and that today was no day for settling feuds. Today was a day to put all that behind. If Central and Briggs had been able to cooperate for the sake of their city and their people, Zinnia should be able to swallow her emotions as well. And yet—

“I cannot go with you now, I’m sorry,” Alex said. “But … if you do find her, send for me.”
She looked at him for a long time. There was so much of Olivier in her, so much of what Olivier hid deep beneath her external layers that in Alex was in plain view. So similar and still so different. She couldn’t deny this man what he asked, even if he hadn’t been able to give her what she had asked of him.

“You’ll be the first to know.”

She went to the gates after that. Any man posted there should have seen her leave. She had no luck in the first other two. Any Briggs soldier that still remained there hadn’t seen her recently. Finally, at the west gate, Zinnia saw another familiar face she hadn’t seen in a while and that she was very glad to see hadn’t perished in the fighting.

She ran into his arms and he lifted her up, even tired as he was.

“Austin!” she said. “You lucky idiot.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Searching for the general. Please tell me you have seen her.”

To her surprise, his response wasn’t the same she had been given up until now.

“Yeah, actually. She and her men were heading for the military hospital.”

Zinnia made him drop her on the ground and she stared at him. She could only beg internally, she could only hope—

“Was she alive, Austin?” She didn’t dare beg out loud.

“I… I couldn’t tell,” he said, lowering his eyes and refusing to look at her. “They were carrying her on a cot.”

“They wouldn’t be taking her to a hospital if she was dead, would they?” she said. It wasn’t a logical explanation, but it was the only one she could come up with now. “They wouldn’t. They’d be putting her with the corpses, right?”

“I haven’t seen any of the generals with the dead. And, to my knowledge, some did die. Gardner, Fox and—”

“She can’t be dead, Austin,” Zinnia said fiercely. “Where is the military hospital?”

“A … few blocks northwest of the train station, but I wouldn’t—”

He couldn’t finish his sentence.

She thanked him quickly and ran outside into the city again. She remembered where the train station was well enough, now she would only have to trust her navigation skills one more to help her find Olivier.

And after she did—

Zinnia shouldn’t think about that.

She couldn’t.
Dead or alive. Dead or alive. Dead or alive. Heartbeats or footsteps?

Did soldiers bring their dead to a morgue? To a medical examiner?

Dead or alive. Please don’t be dead. Dead or alive.

Don’t be dead.

Not dead.

Please.

Olivier Armstrong could not be dead.

Not after everything Zinnia had seen her do, everything they had said to one another after dark, lips hovering over the other’s neck. Not when this war had just been won, all because of Olivier. Not now. Someday, yes, but not now, not like this. Not without Zinnia saying goodbye first. Not without her dying, too.

Dead or alive. Dead or alive. Dead or alive. Is it selfish to wish I was dead too? Did it matter? It was an old book cliché. To die with her loved one, to not see another day without holding her hand and looking into her eyes. So many intertwined lovers had met their end like that, why wouldn’t Zinnia be allowed to choose this as well—rightfully, respectfully?

Dead or alive. Please be alive. Dead or alive.

At the sight of the hospital, Zinnia ran without checking if it was the one she’d been looking for. No one stood at its entrance to block any and all civilians that weren’t injured, so she dashed in like a gust of wind.

Four women worked incessantly behind a counter, behind piles of paperwork and amidst the terrible noise. Of people coming and going, of the ill and injured wailing in pain and misery. Hospitals, ever so silent in times of peace, became the very reincarnation of war when peace was but a gallantry to be curtsied.

Zinnia didn’t feel like waiting, she put both hands on the counter, and asked the first woman she laid eyes on where she could find Oliver Armstrong. When the woman asked who that was, Zinnia’s speech doubled in speed.

“Military, very tall, blonde, long hair, unconscious. Broken arm, probably a few ribs, too. Bruises all over.” Zinnia worded it like a question, breathless at the end of it. “She has to be here.”

“Dead or alive?” the woman asked her.

Zinnia’s heart began to gallop inside her chest, but instead of hooves it had claws, and they gnawed at her, blood-thirsty. What kind of hospital asked this question? What kind of hospital catalogued people this way?

“I… I don’t know,” Zinnia admitted, biting her lip until it bled.

The woman sighed slowly.

“Let me check records, then.” She said it like there was all the time in the world, like this was just another Sunday at work with her pals, a cup of coffee in her desk.
Zinnia didn’t even give her time to turn around and start looking for those records, she just walked straight ahead at the first corridor she saw.

“Hey, you can’t go in there!”

Stop me, then.

Dead or alive. Olivier was either dead or alive. If she was dead, Zinnia would find her at the morgue. But Zinnia would not go to the morgue until she had searched every room in this hospital, surgery rooms included, and then every room in every other hospital in the capital. If Olivier was alive, where would she be?

No one stopped her when she began pushing doors open. Some yelled, some just watched her with ancient eyes from their beds. But she was allowed to move around freely, to look everywhere. She cast her stomach aside to push into the first surgery room, and when she found a man without a leg lying on a gurney and three figures trying to stop the bleeding, Zinnia closed the door and moved on without a second glance. It was almost sanguine, the way she inspected, processed, and advanced to the next door.

Two floors up, a dozen more rooms, three surgery rooms after, Zinnia’s eyes set on something familiar. Dead or alive? A very blonde head, the uniform Zinnia had folded some nights, and that blank expression that wasn’t Olivier’s, that would never be hers, because it was ghastly, empty. No ice, no fire. Just lukewarm.

The woman tending to Olivier shook almost visibly when Zinnia stepped in—a force in her almost hurricane-like—and froze. This doctor, or whatever she was, was the only one to walk up to her and ask her to leave.

“You can’t be here,” she said, calmly. Doctors were said to act well in crisis, their blood cold and rational even when facing death.

But Zinnia had wasted time and very warm blood to have reached this room. Dead or alive. Heartbeat. Dead or alive. Footstep. Dead or alive?

She didn’t ask it. She just stood there, breathing fast, until the doctor tried to push her away, and however gently she tried to do so, Zinnia rebelled.

Something had shifted in Olivier’s blank face. The color hadn’t returned, its old frown wasn’t there yet, but the eyes—those eyes that were ice themselves and could even so cut through ice—had opened.


“You can’t be here, miss!” the doctor tried again.

Stupidly. So stupidly. Because Olivier was alive, and Zinnia’s rage hadn’t forgotten about how it would erupt, a hurricane inside a volcano. And this rage was wrath, bigger and brighter and much more powerful than Wrath’s himself. Her rage would become the next Homunculus. Her rage would rampage. And what was a tiny doctor in the way of that?


A L I V E.
Zinnia could see the arm, the broken bone emerging through the stiff and bloody skin in at least two places; the blood in Olivier’s head and lip; the way her body was nothing like the body Zinnia had pressed against walls. But she could also see those eyes, staring at her, half-open, half-closed, wondering if it was a dream.

_Oh, Olivier Armstrong, I will show you real._

Alive…

“Miss…” the doctor tried again, her voice given up already. She was no match for Zinnia, no one would be until her rage cooled down. Until she said her piece. Until she sat down somewhere and crumbled.

So Zinnia didn’t sit. She just approached the gurney where Olivier rested and stared at her, eyes filling with tears even when they shouldn’t. Olivier should be the one crying, because Zinnia was about to make her want to.

But Olivier stared back, and if she had any strength left, her eyes blinked it in her direction.

“You fucking idiot,” Olivier just said, not looking away for half a second. She had nowhere else to look, nothing she wanted to see, but Zinnia. Bloodied and dirty, her clothes torn and ragged, and her face the perfect portrait of Greek wrath. A goddess made furious by war, by the choices war had led Olivier to make.

“You fucking trigger-happy moron!” Zinnia yelled.

Could the adjective trigger-happy be used for someone who fought with a sword? Someone who, come a Homunculus the size of a building or a legion of undying soldiers, would unsheathe her weapon before she even thought about holding a gun. Could you use a sword in a trigger-happy way? Carelessly? Scandalously carelessly. Olivier knew about careless, all her memories about today were careless.

The fighting, the not dying, the wanting to die to get it all over with, the fighting by pushing past the pain and the blurry vision, the pushing Zinnia away because Zinnia shouldn’t see her like that, the not being allowed to fight until the end. The end … that hadn’t been an end.

Olivier had opened her eyes and she was in this room alone. And she’d thought she was dead, her surroundings pristine and quiet and shining with their own light, until someone had walked in and told her a doctor would be with her soon.

Alive. Even if she shouldn’t have been.

And maybe she had been a little careless, to think that.

“Did you really not get the memo?” Olivier said, her voice failing her more than it had to. She was not in an afterlife with white walls and silence, after all. Her body had paid a price to continue working after everything. “Really? I thought you smarter than that, Zinnia.”

She’d hoped Zinnia had been foolish enough to believe some lie and then had drifted into the sunset, alone and unhurt. _A dream_, Olivier thought now. _Wishful thinking_. A dying woman’s last words. But she wasn’t dying anymore, and she wasn’t dead. And Zinnia wasn’t somewhere in the orange horizon, angry but free. Zinnia was here and beyond angered.

“You,” Zinnia yelled. “You left me behind! You made a pact with an alchemist behind my back and in front of my fucking face to keep me away—again!” She chuckled lifelessly. “While you were
getting slaughtered!”

That much was, at least, true. It had been slaughter. If Olivier closed her eyes, she could smell the blood and the entrails of the bodies that, at some point, had done nothing but pile up around her. She could hear the deafening roars of the battle upstairs she had been banned from. She could feel the death within her.


And Zinnia, too, was alive.

Olivier had saved her life. Olivier had been ready to die to save her.

“If you’d stayed,” she muttered, lips dry and cracked, “you would have died. I… I didn’t know what was coming. I couldn’t … risk it.”

The breath being knocked out of her chest, the sacrifices being drawn to the very last floor of the fortress where Father awaited, the gods being left to meander the earth for precious minutes. Too big, it all had been too big for someone who hadn’t planned but for a battle within Central that Olivier’s people couldn’t win, just keep on delaying their defeat.

“I hate you,” Zinnia spat out. Not a curse, not a statement. Blood, more blood. Olivier was no longer bleeding out, but at this she felt her wounds reopen. “I hate you. I hate you so much.”

“Stop saying that,” Olivier whispered. Maybe if she spoke really quietly, her brain would stop hearing those words, repeated over and over again like a mantle of nails being wrapped around her.

“I hate you! Don’t you ever leave me in the dark again, you hear?”

“Stop fucking saying that. Do you even know what was at stake?”

Zinnia gave out a laugh so dry and soulless that Olivier trembled.

“Funnily enough, yeah!” Zinnia shouted. “I woke up on the street, alone. And I didn’t know what was going on. I had no idea if I was the only one awake. I saw it. I saw the explosions, I saw all that alchemy being thrown around like fireworks, and I knew you were in there. And I couldn’t get in. I couldn’t do anything. How do you think that felt, Olivier? How do you think I feel, even now?”

Looking at you, like a ragdoll on a bed.

The tears came hot and heavy, a downpour. They should have stayed where they were, caged and silenced. They only made Zinnia hate more and more the faster they fell. She was angry, she wasn’t sad. She wanted thunder and lightning around her, something that channeled her rage towards the outside world.

“It’s over now,” Olivier’s voice reached her. A caress in a fistfight. “It’s all over now. Stop crying.”

“You do not command me,” Zinnia snapped.

“I don’t…” Olivier said. Not this woman, maybe every single man left standing in this goddamned city, but not this woman who had tears in her eyes when she was about to flip tables and punch holes in walls. This woman commanded herself, and she knew what she wanted. Olivier, on the other hand, knew what she deserved. Something she couldn’t really give Zinnia when she had abandoned her in a house in the west and when she had done it again in a poorly-lit tunnel to death, because it would have lacked real emotion. She said it now: “I’m sorry.”
Zinnia’s rage wasn’t placated. It throbbed within her, asking for release. But there was something else, something smaller and yet more noticeable, that asked for absolution. For rest. For a tomorrow where today was just a shadow.

“Don’t ever leave me in the dark again,” Zinnia muttered wetly.

And Olivier couldn’t promise her, this time whole-heartedly, that she wouldn’t, because the doctor, respectfully quiet in this awkward situation, finally managed to drive Zinnia out of the door and tend to Olivier’s wounds.

Funny, she thought, drifting off again. For a few minutes, she hadn’t felt the pain of those wounds.

Ushered out like a pathogen, Zinnia sat in the waiting room, arms crossed, and tried very hard to convince herself not to knock down the door and yell a few things at the doctor. She’d been nothing but polite, knowing how to keep her silence during Zinnia’s outburst, but Zinnia belonged in that room, either holding Olivier’s hand or screaming at her, not out here where she didn’t know what was going on.

Gurneys rolled past, the doctors and nurses pushed them running after, yelling incomprehensibly in their medical language. Zinnia noticed most of the people being rolled in were soldiers, either from Briggs or from Central. Very few civilians seemed to have gotten injured today, and that was cause for celebration. The soldiers had done their job well.

And they continued to, somewhere, picking up rumble and bodies alike. Untiring, even when hurt and exhausted. The ones that had made it to this hospital were lucky, in a way. Their fight was over.

She remembered Alex then, and her promise to reach him. To be true to her word, she had plenty more people to tell Olivier had been found. Austin would want to know, Miles would want to know, and every last man who had travelled south in her name would want to know. Zinnia stood up, resolute to ask about until she found a radio she could use.

Central was no military fort, there was no room in this hospital devoted to having radio machines all over in case of an emergency, but in the end, after some tedious asking around, Zinnia found one and did her duty. First, she called Briggs, told whoever picked up the speaker to spread the news that their general was alive and then asked them to find Alex Armstrong and tell him, too.

Alex took his time getting there and when he did, he didn’t come alone. Mustang and Riza showed up behind him, bruised and battered almost beyond recognition. Alex didn’t leave their side until Mustang had been wheeled in—he kept leaning on Riza all the time and his eyes were strangely opaque even from a distance.

They all sat with her in the waiting room. Mustang and Riza would just have to stay there until a doctor had an opening. With the day those doctors had had, no one hoped it would be any soon.

Zinnia couldn’t stop staring at the wound on Riza’s shoulders and the way she clung to the colonel’s hands. They touched incessantly, even when they didn’t have to. She didn’t remember that from the scant times she’d seen the two of them in Central Command, days ago.

There was no chitchat. There were no words for the horror they had seen. They just waited together, because they had to. At one point, the door Zinnia had been asked out of opened, and she stood up stupidly; Olivier was on a gurney and the doctor from before hurried to push her away from there.
“Where are you taking her?”

It didn’t escape Zinnia that Olivier was no longer conscious. Her stomach clenched painfully. She’d been alive minutes ago. She’d been breathing and she’d been talking and she’d had light in her eyes, that light that Zinnia would coax out of her one day until Olivier admitted to having it.

The doctor couldn’t say anything to her. A few more people joined in to help push the gurney where Olivier lay, and Alex and Zinnia ran after them through the narrow corridors of the hospital to a place that had no waiting rooms, just dark doors that promised everything except sunny endings.

One of those doors opened and Olivier’s gurney went in, then the door closed, and Alex and Zinnia panted, leaning against the wall. This would be another kind of waiting, not for news but for developments. *Tell me she’s okay and I’ll leave,* Zinnia thought whenever someone exited that room or walked past Alex and her in the corridor.

No one told them anything until much later, when the night was almost upon Central City. Finally, the dreaded door opened, and the doctor from before walked out, bags under her eyes, her expression desperately serious.

“I take it you’re her family.”

Neither Alex nor Zinnia corrected her.

“How is she?” Alex asked, because if Zinnia had spoken, she would have ended up burning this whole place to the ground with her words. She would have obliterated every doctor with the fire that pulsed in her veins, asking for release.

“She’s been unconscious for a long time now, lost too much blood,” the doctor said. “She seems stable now, but…” She didn’t finish the sentence. “We’ll do what we can for her.”

Then the woman left and the silence that crawled into the mouths of Olivier’s only family could have killed a man as quickly and certainly as the strongest of poisons. The silence of truth, of a truth that was not desired at all. A silence that continued even when the doctor returned and did not go away until hours had passed.

“She won’t give up so easily.” Alex repeated his own words, uttered not that long ago, back to Zinnia. He knew his sister—not well, not after so many years—but he knew how she would have liked to go. He knew she would have fought for a decent ending. She would have fought to see it, another day, another night. When she was old and gray, more medals on her uniform. Giving up was not in Olivier’s vocabulary.

But Zinnia, despite not having had the years to know her that Alex had, did know her well. So much of what people saw and thought of Olivier Armstrong was just a façade. A little frown here, a little yell there. A posture that could snap necks, a commanding presence that lasted only until the sun set. It hadn’t been easy for Olivier to fool everyone as she did, so continuously, but she made it look so. No one pretended more than her to be an enemy of everyone, a true rival, and a menace if set loose at the wrong time.

The truth was … Olivier was as painstakingly human as everybody else. The ice in her wept and melted when the summer sun rose. Her body withered and broke if malnourished and mistreated. And she only ever pretended to have everything under control.

Alex was not aware of this truth, despite being an Armstrong himself and understanding what it took to continue to look it. Perhaps he thought he was the weak, odd-one out in a family of great strength,
but he was wrong. That great strength of the Armstrong was only just physical.

“It’s not in her hands,” Zinnia told him. “It’s never been in her hands. She just made us all believe it was.”

Olivier’s fate was out of her hands, now. And Zinnia had to lean here, against a wall, and wait for that fate to be decided by something or someone else. Dead … or alive. *Will she die or will she live?* The hardest part was that no one would answer the question until the answer was flesh and bone, breath and heartbeat—either gone or ongoing. Olivier would answer that question soon, and they all would know, in the end, if her strength had managed to seep farther than just her arms and surname.

It was a while until Alex spoke again, his voice now softer and gentler, but still full of premature grief. The hospital was no quieter now that night had fallen at last, and yet he was. The world didn’t deserve this man, Zinnia thought. She would have wished for no other company but his today.

“You know, I hadn’t seen her in… too long, when you both came back to Central,” he said. “I can’t believe it all has come to happen this way. She never… never thought me worthy, after Ishval. I never got to tell her… tell her that…”

Tell her that he was sorry he disappointed her to the point she had broken all ties with him and their parents. All because of a war she hadn’t even fought in. Olivier’s wrath had clearly soaked the letters she had written home after Alex had come back from the east. Alex had tried writing back, without a single reply from her. He’d tried to explain that he had done the right thing by those dying families—with children and elderly people in them—and his sister had given him the cold shoulder, the silent treatment. Olivier, once his guide light, his hero and his role model. Olivier, who wanted nothing to do with him anymore, who would have burned him off the family trees and the official documents if she had been able to.

Alex had known how much she hated him, yet he hadn’t been able to ever hate her back. He had loved her, that older sister who never seemed fully happy and always was either alone or looking forward to being so. He had had nothing else in his life he loved so much as Olivier. Amue and Strongine had ignored him, preferring to play together. He’d only ever had Olivier.

During the war, in first line of combat, his whole body itching because of the sand and the pain of holding machine guns and the weight of all those lives, burned out like candles, Alex had thought of her. The perfect soldier, to him. She would have known what to do, how to stop this injustice. When Alex had fallen to his knees, the fire in his hands no longer active, he’d wept alone, wishing she’d been there. Maybe she would have forced him back on his feet, urging him to do his duty as a soldier even if he couldn’t do as told, but she would have been *there*, like she used to. Instead, she’d been miles and miles away, north.

Days later, Alex had arrived in Central, his heart devoid of joy. His parents had reluctantly taken him in, despite what he’d done, but he hadn’t had to endure their disappointment for long. Instead, he’d had to face the words of his sister, who he’d missed, who he’d wanted with him. Her fury and her condescendence. Her hatred.

Everything he’d done since had been done in the hope that Olivier would one day be proud of her little brother again. All he’d ever wanted was to see the old smile in her face, approving of him, of his acts.

All he’d ever wanted was his sister back.

And now the world might be stripping her away from him.
His tears came first, a whole river of them, and the humongous body of Alex Armstrong slid all the way to the floor, where he hugged his knees.

“Your sister is an idiot. A big one,” Zinnia said. Then she walked decidedly towards the door and hit it. With her open palms, with her knuckles, with her fist. It vibrated slightly when she did, and she didn’t stop for a while. Every hit on it was a word. “You hear me, Olivier? A fucking idiot, that’s what you are! A fucking idiot who has been blind for so many years. You can’t push us away again. You can’t keep me quiet and meek, Armstrong. So, wake up! Because if you don’t wake up, I’m going to—” Her tears came second.

That the world was cruel, Zinnia knew. But never in her life would she have imagined it ending like this, on the cold marble floors of a hospital in the center of the country, with the brother of the woman he loved putting a hand on her shoulder and silently inviting her to sit down with him.

To wait.

Dead or alive. Dead or alive. Dead or alive. Heartbeats? Or tears?

Chapter End Notes

I feel like somehow I'm making everything worse with each new chapter, what the hell were you thinking, past me?
In the middle of the night, the city rested, but not the hospitals. The hospitals remained awake, putting children and adults to bed and tucking them in with a kiss on the forehead and a promise that tomorrow would be better, less painful, while they had their own wounds and afflictions to treat.

“You can come in,” the nurse said. “But please keep it down.”

He left the room to let Alex and Zinnia in. They’d been dozing off, heads pressed together, their backs still against the wall of the corridor, when the nurse had opened the door before them to tell them to go home. Even with fuzzy brains, the both of them had refused adamantly, and the nurse had sighed.

Olivier was in one of the surgery rooms, but she wasn’t alone. Three other beds had been stacked horizontally in whatever little space there was among the greenish blue of the equipment around them and the terrible gray of scalpels and surgical trays.

She’d been rid of her blue uniform jacket and in its place, bandages covered her torso and right arm. She was lying down on her back, but her eyes weren’t closed, and she wasn’t looking up at the ceiling. Olivier was staring right at the door, where Alex and Zinnia stood, the breaths knocked out of them.

Alex, ever the gentleman, bent the knee before his sister, so he could look her in the eye without hurting his neck. Zinnia didn’t have the heart to move any closer than the door. Light came from the corridor and illuminated the top of Olivier’s head. She looked like so much more than just plain ordinary human.

“I thought we had seen the last of you, sister,” Alex said.

“You wish, Alex…” Olivier said. She didn’t sound strong, but she sounded okay. As okay as she could be. She had a bit of color on her cheeks and, although her hair had been carelessly tied into something like a bun, it shone in the light. All the dirt and blood had been cleaned from it, and the cuts in her face, from blade and rock alike, were only a few shades pinker than the rest of her face.

“You insist on that, jokingly as it is, but it breaks my heart to see you like this, Olivier.”

Like what? Olivier thought. On a bed, on something that could have easily been a deathbed? There was only a thing she could say to that.

“Don’t cry over me—”

“—you’ll be crying all day,” Zinnia finished, finally walking towards the two siblings.

Olivier’s eyes stopped scrutinizing the expression on her brother’s face to hold Zinnia’s gaze. It was no longer raging. It was placid and warm and tired, so very tired. But Olivier loved it all the same, all those shades of brown mixed like milk in coffee.

“You… called me an idiot. And… a trigger-happy moron,” she muttered. “I wonder if you know idiot and moron are synonyms.”
“I’m a writer, I believe I know, general.”

“Did my brother drag you here by force?”

“On the contrary,” Alex said. “She told me to leave hours ago, once we’d been told you were in stable condition. I didn’t think it appropriate to leave her alone. I worried she might be the one to kill you.”

After the tears they both had cried, Zinnia’s anger had resurfaced, directed at nothing and no one in particular because it had grown too uncontrollable. She had been lucid enough to ask him to leave, because it was late and he had fought a war and was the last man standing, still fighting it when it was almost over. But Alex had looked her in the eye, put a hand to her own, and asked her if she would mind if he stayed a little longer.

“You find it funny, don’t you?” Olivier said.

“I don’t. None of this is funny. This woman… the fact that you have to keep her a secret… is a crime.”

“Do you truly think mother would allow it, if she knew?”

“She will have to. None of the past thirty years have been fair to you. It’s time we made things right.” He offered Olivier his hand to squeeze. “I will make sure they are.”

She eyed his hand suspiciously. He had the long face of their mother, angled and long. At times, it had spoken the same words Gwendolyn had. Olivier wanted to trust it, but knew she shouldn’t. Just in case.

“I don’t care. It’s been too long. I don’t care…”

She was too tired to care. She was on a bed, alive against all odds and presumptions, and caring was the last thing she would do. There was so much to do before that. Fixing an entire country, building the command center back up, warning everyone who had evacuated that the city was safe—

Alex’s hand, finally, rested upon her left.

“Oh, my dear sister, but you do.”

Olivier couldn’t believe they were talking about this now, in the middle of the night, when a war had just ended. Nothing mattered as little as Zinnia being a secret. It was the price Olivier had paid for infiltrating Central Command and trying to outsmart the generals that schemed inside the command center. It was the price she had paid to not be kicked out of her family house like a common dog with fleas.

But… just because it didn’t matter, that didn’t mean she didn’t care anyway. Olivier always cared, even when she thought she didn’t. Caring was what drove her to extremes and had her sacrifice everything for other people. And she’d had to hide it for so long she’d forgotten how to show it—own it—in fear of being shunned because of it, of being labeled a poor woman who couldn’t handle things.

Alex hadn’t shunned her once. Alex had been observant enough to notice her caring.

“And so do I, you know?” Alex said. In that moment, Olivier understood many things, without needing him to spell them out for her. Why Zinnia had made that comment, after the fight. How Alex had looked at that broad man Izumi Curtis was married to, with something a little too bright to just be
friendly admiration. “It has not been easy for me either. You were not the only one who hid from
mother.”

Thirty-something years and they had never spoken about this. About chasing the wrong gender out
in the streets, about keeping their orientations a secret because their mother would never approve of
either of them. Thirty years, and Alex had been hiding, too. So deftly, so aptly, she had never
noticed. Her own brother, being put through the same hell she had, and she had never picked up on
it.

“I’m sorry,” she choked out. She didn’t tear up, these words had to be said without tears, they had to
be said in eye contact. And, even so, they would never be enough. They could never make up for the
past years of their lives. “I’m sorry I left you behind.”

Her eyes were wet already when she felt Zinnia’s hand squeezing her own, listening. It helped
Olivier find the courage to continue talking, in almost murmurs, whispers of the heart.

The words she said echoed loud and strong in the heart of her brother.

“I’m… sorry I—You might be a deserer—”

Alex flinched at that word.

“—but I shouldn’t have forgotten you are and will always be my brother first and foremost.”

“O-Olivier?”

“You’re my brother,” she pressed on. “And I’m proud of you.”

For growing up in a family like theirs, for having found his way in life, for always believing in
Olivier even when she hadn’t wanted to return the favor, for fighting in wars that weren’t his, for
never losing his own, for accepting her at face value, for loving her. For being Alex Armstrong, the
Strong Arm Alchemist.

She might have not teared up, but he did. Loudly and copiously. And she was prouder of him still.
She could never cry with an audience. Until she did.

She swallowed her own tears away.

“Now get the fuck out and call our parents,” she told him. “Tell them it’s safe now. Tell them they
can come home.”

Alex smiled and patted her hand, the hand Zinnia was still holding.

“You made it safe, sister. Thank you.” And he didn’t just mean now, March 21st—now 22nd—of
the year 1915. He meant for so much more than just now. She had paved the road he now walked on.
She had been the pioneer, the fighter leading the armies into the unknown. She had been the
victor that had emerged from the dust and ash, sword in her hand, drenched in her enemies’ blood,
and had made sure everyone else was okay even if she was hurting.

Before he left, he told Zinnia: “Take good care of her for me, flower girl.”

She grumbled at the nickname, but nodded anyway. She had nothing left to do now except sit here,
by Olivier’s bed, and make sure she was okay. And even that she didn’t know how to do.

“How’re you doing?” Zinnia asked after a while, leaning on the wall next to Olivier’s bed. Her voice
was but a whisper. She had remembered now that the nurse had asked her to be quiet. Late at night as it was, so many patients would be trying to sleep now, despite the pain and discomfort of everything, and Zinnia didn’t want to add to that.

Olivier almost laughed on the bed.

Was there any way at all to answer that? She was bruised and battered and she was tired and sleepless and the day had lasted too long. She just wanted to close her eyes and wake up when everything was as it used to be, with Central soldiers hating Briggs and Briggs soldiers hating Central and everybody doing everything on separate sides of the continent. But Zinnia was here, her eyes screaming even if her mouth wasn’t anymore, and Olivier didn’t feel capable of more than just keeping her eyes open in her direction.

The way she saw it, this was it. Another death would come upon her right now, on the dawn of the new day, and Zinnia would lay it down easy for her, then leave. It was what she should do, in Olivier’s book. What she should have done months ago and yet had refused to.

“I’ll live,” she only said.

“That’s good.”

They were strangers, Olivier realized now. War had made them so. With her lies and her refusal to let anything be. She had to manipulate fate, she just had to. At her own detriment, if need be. And it was worth it if Zinnia had the physical strength to just get up and leave the same way she’d come, alive and capable. Olivier wouldn’t have stood to be the one looking down at Zinnia on a hospital bed.

“Is it?” Olivier said sarcastically.

“Do you want me to wish for your death or something?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do know. What do you want? Do you want me to leave or—”

Olivier almost hissed in frustration. The words came to her, knotted and tangled, and she only had five fingers now—not as deft as per usual—to try and manually undo that mess.

“Do you want to leave?”

“Don’t bullshit this!” Zinnia said, louder than she meant to. This was going nowhere, they were always going to come at each other as softly as possible and this would never end. “We’re going to have to talk about it.”

“I don’t want to talk about anything,” Olivier said weakly, turning her face towards the window to her right. The moon was not visible, there were only gray clouds eclipsing the dark blue of the night, and the buildings in the distance had some lights on.

“What do you want, Olivier? What do you want me to do? I yelled at you, which felt great, but then they took you away and I didn’t know anything for hours and—honestly?—I just wanted to know if you were okay. I know that now. I—I don’t want to yell at you any longer, even if I have plenty of reasons to.”

Olivier kept looking at the spot in the sky where the moon should have been.
“You won’t even deign to answer me?”

“All I can tell you is… that I’m sorry,” Olivier said. “I’m sorry for everything that’s happened. Everything I put you through to get you out of the city.”

“It didn’t work.”

Slowly, Olivier’s eyes met Zinnia’s.

“And that’s why I’m sorry. You should be in that house, waiting.”

Zinnia snorted. “You wouldn’t have made it out alive if I’d stayed. You would have died.”

Olivier didn’t find the wherewithal to lie about that being true. Without Zinnia around, Olivier would have kept getting up, despite no longer being able to see properly and having more bruised ribs than she could feel, and eventually either the legion or Sloth would have ended her life.

“And you wouldn’t have witnessed anything you have today,” Olivier said softly. “Your mind would be clean of that filth.”

Zinnia’s eyes were visible for almost a second in the dimness, burning bright again with the intensity of real flames.

“I think I know which I prefer.”

“I think I know, too,” Olivier said.

Zinnia’s back unglued itself from the wall in a heartbeat. She almost lunged at the bed like a lioness at prey, sat down next to Olivier, and glared. It was almost an animal glare, but it didn’t contain hate so much as rage. The promised rage.

“Say that again to my face,” Zinnia growled. “Say it. Say you wanted to die. I dare you.”

Olivier just stared back, blankly. What she’d wanted didn’t matter now. She was here, tied to a bed and broken in so many parts she couldn’t even get up. She had to withstand this even if she would have just liked to turn her back on Zinnia and sleep. She would have run away from this conversation, if she could have.

“I would prefer to die than tarnish you.”

“Tarnish me?” Zinnia said. “Like I’m some precious object nobody can touch in case they leave fingerprints? This is war!” Her voice rose and rose and Olivier almost feared someone would come in and drag Zinnia out. Zinnia would have fought, too, against leaving. It would have been a scene. And Olivier would have replayed it until she’d fallen asleep. “And I’m as much a soldier as you, I’ve as much right to fight it, to protect my own.”

But that was where Zinnia had gone wrong. No amount of time spent at Briggs would have made her a soldier. She’d just been a girl, trained in the art of fighting an opponent that loved her and firing a gun with Olivier’s hands on her hips. That girl hadn’t been ready for war.

Her men had, and yet … so many had ended up dead on the cobblestone, on red carpets, on the stairs. Little had it mattered that they’d been soldiers with solid causes to fight a war, they had died all the same. And their loved ones would only ever get to see their bodies in caskets, driven back home to be buried underneath a gravestone with their names. All those families would have was a name carved in stone.
“Buccaneer is dead…” Olivier muttered.

Buccaneer, over six feet tall, with an automail arm that could chop entire trees down, resilient as any of the younger men, and he had fallen all the same. Because he’d fought. If Olivier had been able—somehow—to tie him to a chair in Briggs, even if he would have spat and raged and called her names, he would still be alive, probably in this very room right now, cracking jokes so Olivier would feel at home.

There was no home. It had been plucked out of her like feathers from a bird. Name after name, her home had dissolved.

Zinnia made a little noise, very much bird-like, too. She clasped her hands to her mouth and gave out a tiny sob.

“He’s ... gone?” she whispered, inadvertently dropping down on the side of the bed. Olivier could feel her warmth by her side.

Olivier nodded.

“He was one of the best I’ve ever known,” she said, trying to sound strong and firm, even if her voice shook. “So many years in the force, there was no one as ready, as prepared, as him. And he’s dead.” She pierced Zinnia’s eyes with her own. She had become momentarily the general again, tall and powerful, the commander of many and the head of this body. “What do you think would have happened if you’d been a part of this like he was? Do you think I would have survived to see you dead?”

Tears splotched Olivier’s sheets as Zinnia covered her eyes with her hands and muffled her sobs. They came as quickly as the tears had, and they were her way to mourn, to express the many emotions clotting her stomach after hearing the news.

“If the war hadn’t killed me,” Olivier muttered, mostly to herself. “I would have died, then. At the sight of you, gone from me forever.”

As a puppet with its strings cut, Zinnia fell forward slowly, until her forehead was against Olivier’s bandaged chest. It hurt when there was contact, but Olivier just bit her tongue and closed her eyes. It didn’t hurt that much. Not as much as the thought of death—not her own, but other people’s. Her people’s. That was the ghost that would chase her until the end of her days. She had buried people in the snow, well past the border into Drachman territory; she had buried people here, in the elegant tiles of Central Command, with bite marks in their flesh and bullet wounds in their chests.

“I’ll never leave you…” came Zinnia’s whimper. “Not even if you try to make me.”

And that was when Olivier broke. Not in sobs, not in incoherent mutters, but inside something shifted, something shattered, and the shards pierced her heart, thunderous and bravely. She had expected a break-up in the best case scenario of this conversation. Instead, Zinnia was reiterating the same truth she had always bared before Olivier. The same old truth that Olivier had trouble believing would still stand the next time she ruined something.

Olivier’s left hand trembled slightly as she lifted and placed it on the crown of Zinnia’s head. They were together, despite all odds, and Olivier wasn’t leaving either, not just because she physically couldn’t. She loved this woman, leaving had ceased to be an option the first time that Zinnia had come back. Olivier would not and could not leave her again. She had to voice that, swear it. She had to promise to gods and mortals alike that whatever still remained of their relationship she would never abandon in the name of false protection.
The day after dawned tranquil. A Monday like any other, only this time just some parts of the city ran as always. Most activity was restricted to sweeping dust and rumble out of the streets and distributing resources to hospitals. No private cars were on the roads that morning, either. All the city was grieving, and a few days of mourning had been decided on to keep people out of their offices and jobs. All except the remaining soldiers and nurses and doctors, of course.

Alex had slept tonight in his old room in the Armstrong mansion, alone. For the first time in years, that house breathed no air but his own, and he hadn’t been able to stand the sight of empty rooms. He had skipped breakfast, his stomach suddenly closed up, and headed straight for the hospital. After leaving Zinnia with Olivier the night before, he hadn’t been able to just stay around. Those two needed to talk things out and be in each other’s presence for a while. It may well still be the last war to be fought, and it was one Olivier might not win.

Not in her state, anyway.

He took his time to arrive, wanting to make the most of the morning and also to find some things out so he would have something to tell her. She had left him to be his eyes and ears when she hadn’t been allowed to go face Father with the rest of able combatants, and even though that part of the battle was over, Alex had taken it very much to heart and decided he would still be that for his sister.

Something inside him had changed last night, when her words had emerged out of her like a torrent and she hadn’t tried to dam it. She’d said she was proud of him. Proud… Just a tiny little word, and yet it had left him feeling at peace. And Alex Armstrong had never known true peace, having lived under his mother’s rule for many years before enlisting to fight an unfair war called genocide. It was funny, how his sister’s words had brought him that, when she had always been a catalyst for war in their family.

He was cleared to go in at the hospital’s counter. He’d had a spare uniform shirt laying around at home, so he looked like a soldier would have the day before yesterday. Polished and practically dressed, the clerks hadn’t taken a second look at him. On his way to his sister’s room, he saw he wasn’t the only soldier around. Plenty others wore either Briggs’ attire or the usual blue colors of the military. He was glad for their presence, and sad for the reasons behind it. They all had lost something or had been close to losing it.

When he arrived, the door was open. Alex pushed it to get in and stopped mid-step. Two bodies slept on his sister’s bed, as curled around each other as it was possible in Olivier’s circumstances. The sight took his breath away, especially after last night’s palpable tension. This was so gentle and natural in comparison he didn’t know if he should leave like he had last night or simply wake the two of them up. Perhaps the new day would help them through this, shed light on a new perspective as well. He could only hope.

He grabbed a chair from a corner and sat by the bed. It didn’t take them too long to stir, their backs probably throbbing after spending so many hours in the same posture.

Olivier’s eyes opened as they always did, like she had been awake the whole time. She took one good look at Alex before speaking softly, so as not to wake Zinnia:

“What time is it?”
“Around noon,” he said, just as softly. “Should I call a doctor? Are you well?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “This is nothing that should keep me bed-bound.”

After all, a broken arm could very well be taken home to heal. Not that Olivier would stay there much. As soon as everything was more or less up and running, she would be, too. The reconstruction of this country’s foundations could not exist without her.

“Tell me,” Olivier said, begging him with her eyes to just speak of everything he had seen out in the world the morning after disaster. “What’s the situation?”

Alex took a deep breath.

“Chaotic,” he said. “Very much chaotic, still. There is a rumor going on that what happened was an alchemical experiment gone wrong and that you and Mustang were able to stop it.”

Olivier scoffed.

“And Bradley?”

“Tragically met his end in a train accident east,” Alex said. He sighed, like he had more to say and didn’t know how to say it. “I was also able to reach mother and father.”

Olivier made a disgruntled noise, although she had been the one to ask him.

“They were a little surprised to find out you had driven them out of the country in view of the war.”

“You told them that?!”

Zinnia slowly lifted her head a little from Olivier’s chest and looked at Alex standing there next to the bed.

“What’s going on?” she said, still half-asleep. Alex wasn’t too sure she knew there was something, indeed, going on.

“You brute!” Olivier said to him. “That wasn’t for them to know!”

He blushed.

“How else was I supposed to explain the reason for my calling?”

“You had many possible fake reasons to choose from,” Olivier almost yelled. Quickly, she turned to Zinnia, who ogled at everything like a baby who had been blindfolded and taken to a new place without warning or preparation, and said to her: “Go back to sleep, little one.”

Alex almost choked in his own saliva.

Paying them no attention, Zinnia managed to sit up on the bed, hair sticking up from having slept on it wrong, and blinked at Alex.

“She doesn’t want people to know she’s soft,” she said matter-of-factly. “Everybody knows this.”

Alex was able to gather a bit of composure and speak again:

“Either way,” he said, “our parents said they are on their way and will be here very soon.”
“Here here?” Olivier asked.

“That was not made clear.”

“I’m going to kill you,” she muttered under her breath.

If her parents showed up at the hospital, she thought she might die for real this time. It was enough that they thought her deviant, but to see her in bed and basically unable to move meant they would be able to get a hold of her. And her mother would talk of marriage and her father would have plenty of wealthy male candidates who were willing to marry her and that would go on for hours. Torture, in less words.

“If it helps,” Alex added, “I do not really think they would be able to endure the plebeian air of this place.” He gifted her with a gentle smile.

“Any second spent in the presence of your parents is arduous,” she said.

“Maybe Catherine would be kind enough to accompany them? She would greatly lessen their effect.”

The conversation ended with Alex getting a kick in the shins, and how Olivier had managed to position herself in order to hit her mark, Zinnia would never know. She just laughed when Alex pretended her sister’s kick had hurt and held his leg, leaping on the other. She wondered if they had been like that as children too, and if there would ever come a time when they would act as adults around each other.

Alex didn’t really leave, either. He kept trying to reposition her pillows and asking her if she wanted anything, to which she mostly just replied she wanted his head smashed somewhere, jokingly. He was someone Zinnia was glad for. If he had gone get coffee at any time, she was sure she would have crumbled again or maybe Olivier would have this time, and neither of them would have known how to handle that much crumbling.

He talked a little, too, when Olivier wasn’t trying to challenge him. That was how Zinnia found out about what lies were being sold to the population and, most importantly, about what had really happened while she had been trapped in the city streets. The battle, solemnly described by Alex’s beautifully raw words, almost seemed alive in her mind, still capable of hurting them. When he finished, silence reigned in the room for a few seconds. The world had been set right at last, if Father was truly gone from this earth and the Elric brothers were all bone and flesh again.

After, Alex informed Olivier of who else was in the hospital with her. She was secretly pleased to find out Mustang and Hawkeye were both in better shape than she was. And she was surprised when she heard Scar had been admitted as well. She had heard tales about him from Edward Elric. But she had also seen him stand near Bradley’s corpse, bearing the mark of his death as much as Buccaneer had. Perhaps Scar’s story wasn’t over just yet. Ishval would never really be avenged, she knew that well.

At some point, a doctor did arrive, asking everybody to leave the room so Olivier could be given proper medical attention. Alex left, but Olivier held on firmly to Zinnia’s wrist, silently asking for no permission and asserting a dominance that slowly she was intent on regaining.

“She is as good as my wife,” Olivier said, for all explanation.

The doctor rolled her eyes but said nothing. She just changed the bandages and took a look at bruises and wounds alike in the light of the new day.
When some food came early in the afternoon, Olivier was hardly able to eat any. She had a general feeling of pain everywhere, not just on bruises or broken bones, that spread even inside. It wasn’t physical, and yet it kept her from having her healthy appetite back. Zinnia managed to talk her into nibbling a little, but only after promising her to write her a war poem when they got back home.

In reality, there was no going back home. After the war came the burials, the truces, the politics. It would be a long time before Olivier stepped foot in the north again, she knew. But it wasn’t that what had compressed her appetite into nothingness. She wasn’t even sure there was a reason. It had just been all of it, coming together into her life, hoping to destroy her. If she hadn’t been who she was, they would have succeeded.

Zinnia got her to eat in spite of every foul word Olivier let out in refusal, Alex carried her to the bathroom bridal-style when he caught her trying to get up on her own, and the doctors, who returned later in the afternoon, predicted a slow but steady recovery for the body that had been gossiped to be ice and iron, both.

The sun was high when Miles left his poor accommodations in the hospital to take a walk. He needed air, and not just to breathe. It felt like Central Command all over again when he was trapped in there with all those soldiers around, joking and laughing like nothing had happened. He was one of the lucky ones. The battle had left him—his body—intact. No wounds, no scratches. Nothing to show for it. Miles was survivor’s guilt personified, dragging his hardened feet past rooms and more rooms into the light of the spring sun.

I guess it is spring now. Briggs men didn’t like spring. They liked the cold and the snow, the sunrises reflecting on all that white. They liked the beer and the defrosted meat and the many ways to keep warm during the long winters. Spring brought clear water and some brushes of green in the landscape, pleasanter food and less layers of coats. And this one had been foresaid to be warmer than usual, almost as warm as last year’s.

Spring had stripped more than the cold from Miles this time. He wasn’t willing to forgive it. He knew loss, better than most, at an age that should have been about eating his weight in something and finding someone to warm his bed at night. Instead, he had worked dutifully and without complaint because he liked it, and because he had thought there would be plenty of time for leisurely things in the future. War had showed up instead, bearing a sign that read: There is never plenty of time. There is never time. Miles had gone south for a man that had died south. Miles, who had watched his birth land be purposely attacked and reviled and destroyed, who had been at risk of suffering the same fate, had faced another war—promised to be worse than Ishval’s—because a man had asked him to. A man that had been strong and smart, thirsting for action and blood-shed. A man who had died fighting, bleeding from a stab wound until his eyes had closed.

It was that man’s face he saw everywhere, that man’s voice that whispered in his ear the absurdly ungentle comments that he always had back at Briggs.

“Look at that dude’s ass, Miles,” it said to him. “I swear to god he’s gotten softer in the war than stuffing his face with rabbit at home.”

And Buccaneer’s voice would also laugh. And it would go on for an accurate amount of time. Until Miles actually smiled and looked to his side, expecting to find him there, and instead there was only empty space. It always made his heart hurt, like something sharp had gone through it. He almost always wished for that, too, if only desperately and stupidly. Miles didn’t know how to want to die, not really. He just wanted this pain to be over.
Outside, things seemed normal, and while that contributed still to the illusion, the details were obviously off. Almost too empty streets, barely any cars, and the silence. Like everyone had decided to stop talking at the same time.

Miles breathed in the polluted city air. Nothing like Briggs’, not even by far. This was a much poorer version of air, it didn’t smell but of piss and gasoline, and it cloaked his lungs with smoke. But it was all he had left, and all he had abandoned his little corner in a more or less quiet corridor of the hospital for.

“You’re here,” said someone behind him.

It wasn’t Buccaneer, but for a split second Miles’s mind allowed itself to think it was. When he turned around to politely ask whoever it was to mind their own business and leave him alone, he saw a faint echo of the life Miles hardly remembered anymore.

Red eyes, brown skin, and the marks of old wars visible in it. Scar, an enemy turned ally in the darkest hour.

“I am,” Miles only said.

“You weren’t hurt.”

Scar only stared at him, those red eyes pools of not only wisdom but truth. Rawer than other people were willing to offer it. And Miles needed this truth to stop lying to himself.

“These Amestrian doctors are afraid of me,” Scar said. “They healed me and let me go.”

Like a dog with blood on its teeth in a veterinarian’s table. A dog that had aided in the construction of the Reverse Circle with many other Ishvalans from the deserted east and their hideouts all over the country. Ishval had helped save Amestris, and Miles would never understand. Ishval had killed for Amestris. And now what would Amestris do?

Miles dared to hope something better was coming, because nothing could be as bad as what they had had before.

“They don’t know who you are.” His words seemed to take Scar by surprise.

“They do.”

“They know Scar, a killer, an avenger. They don’t know you.”

“Nor you,” Scar said solemnly. Miles was extra aware now that he wasn’t wearing his goggles and that he hadn’t worn them for a while. Perhaps he had even lost them in the battle and now they were dust beneath a rock. This meant Scar could see Miles’s red eyes as much as Miles could see Scar’s.

Kin, finding each other side by side in the winning side of a war. Miles had never treated with him much during his travels through Amestris on orders from Olivier, Scar had been quiet more often
than not and had kept his reasons for acting the way he did to himself. All Miles had had to delve into the past and present of the Ishvalan had been the tales of Edward and Alphonse Elric. But Miles, too, hadn’t let Scar know. Not for one second. He was a bit ashamed to be close to a man who took justice in his own hand to act in revenge for the evils done to both their land, even if he himself had once dreamed of bringing hell to the enemies of Ishval.

He had only just been a soldier to the world, excepting a few, even to a fellow Ishvalan.

“Why do you wear their uniform?” Scar asked him.

And Miles had no real answer to give. Because it was all that he knew, because he didn’t think he knew how to be anything else, because his life was in a military fort with other soldiers. At least until now, it had been.

He said nothing.

“You held that man as he died,” Scar said, visibly trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. “He was one of them, and yet you held him, closed his eyes. Why?”

That, Miles would have been able to answer. Because I loved him. Because he was my friend. Buccaneer hadn’t been just another soldier Miles might have hated once. Buccaneer was everybody’s comrade and Miles’s friend. Buccaneer was the backbone of that fort. Because when he died, I died too. And I know he would have liked to hold me.

“They’re not all Bradley,” Miles only said. “Don’t take this the wrong way: some are like him, some are worse. Many will fight for the wrong reasons and under the wrong orders. But … some—some have a heart. Ideals, values. Some hold more than just hatred inside them.”

And some… some try to fix the word day after day, without anyone ever knowing. Without taking credit for it.

“Your general?” Scar asked.

Olivier. Olivier Armstrong, his shield and his valor turned woman. She who built bridges and castles on her way to erect cities and save whole countries and yet pretended to only care about her own war, protected up north in her wall. Olivier had asked her soldiers not to come south to fight with her, when she knew well that this meant dying alone. Olivier had sheltered Miles when the Führer’s order had come and she had not given a shit about being found out. She had done what she thought was right. And every time she did that, she did so in silence, in secrecy. Hardly anyone knew that the Impregnable Wall of Briggs had a heart as soft as a marshmallow.

“I saw her during the battle,” Scar said. “She is as she’s described.”

“She’s barely as she’s described,” Miles said. And he decided to tell Scar what only Briggs men knew. “She kept me safe during the war.” They both knew what war he was referring to. “She could have handed me over to Bradley on a platter, but she gave me a pair of goggles instead and made me her adjutant. And despite all that, she would have put a sword in my hand and let me fight her over Ishval if I’d asked.”

“A remarkable woman,” Scar agreed. “She is here.”

Miles opened his eyes wide.

“She’s… here?”
“She was brought in as I was.”

Miles was about to rush in and find her. The thought of her leaving him too terrified him with strong fervor, but he looked once more into the eyes of the man they called Scar and knew this—whatever it was—was not over yet.

He put a hand on the other man’s shoulder.

“You would enjoy meeting her,” he said, clearly inviting.

Scar’s normally serious expression curved slightly into a shadow of a smile.

“Perhaps another day.”

Miles left hurriedly. Scar remained where he was for a few minutes, looking at the sun, then went to roam the city he had helped save.

Miles only ever had to ask. Many times, he had done just that when Olivier needed him to do anything. People might look stand-offish and cold, but politeness and good manners tended to soften them enough for Miles to finally get what he wanted from them.

The room in question was several floors up. Miles almost flew over the stairs, even after being told that Olivier’s life wasn’t in danger anymore. It was the ‘anymore’ that didn’t let him feel relief.

The door was open. He could hear voices inside the room, voices he knew and voices he didn’t. Slowly, he peeked in to see if it was a bad time, and found all four beds occupied and surrounded by people. The second from his right was Olivier’s. Her brother and Zinnia were both there, laughing at something someone had said. Olivier looked … differently tired than Miles was used to. This wasn’t a tiredness that sleep and coffee could soothe. Even so, she managed a weak smile from time to time.

Watching her from a distance, Miles almost didn’t realize it when Olivier’s eyes found him by the door.

“Miles!” she called.

And then he had no choice but to go in.

Zinnia hugged him as soon as he was close enough. He closed his eyes and tried not to cry as she said she was sorry and held him tighter.

Then, Alex offered him a hand to shake, which Miles did.

The two of them left right after, loudly saying something about getting coffee. And then it was just Miles and Olivier in the same room, a hospital room occupied by plenty of other people, injured and uninjured alike. Families and friends coming to see their loved ones.

Who was he? Miles wondered. Family or friend?

When Olivier sat up for him, he almost smiled, despite himself. She was still keen on acting strong, like she was the only authority figure and had to keep looking it.

“There’s no need for that,” he told her.

“Nonsense, I’m your general.”

And she was. He’d been so distraught since yesterday that he had almost forgotten. About his loyalty
and love for her, neither stronger than the other.

Miles asked how she was and she lied about it, as always. Then she asked him and he had no choice but to understand why she lied. Because sometimes the truth hurt not just others but yourself. They looked at each other and knew exactly what was missing.

“What should we do?” What should we do with him? Olivier didn’t dare ask that, but she had almost asked it, for Miles. Because Miles couldn’t. But he still had to face this. They all had. “What… what would he like us to do?”

They were in a hospital, living and breathing, but death would never escape them.

“I think…” Miles said, voice hoarse. “I think he’d like to be buried. He was always more than just ashes.”

Olivier regarded him for a second, sad.

“We can’t take him north, Miles.” It would be days—weeks—until they could get everyone back to Briggs.

“I know. I know…”

“We’re just going to have to bury him here.”

Miles smiled to himself, remembering. “He’d hate that.”

“Oh, god, yes…” He thought he was going mad, but he was seeing Olivier smile too, tears in her eyes. “Buried with Central dogs…”

“He died defending some of them,” Miles said. “So maybe he’d be partial to it.

They both laughed softly. Buccaneer would have raged and raged at the thought of sharing a grave with Central soldiers until reminded that he had fought alongside with them, for some of their lives. Then he would have loudly shut up and blushed, admitting thus that he’d been wrong.

Miles was sure that Olivier could see him, too, doing just that by their side.

“I’ll find him a nice spot in a cemetery far from the city,” Olivier said after a while. Miles was surprised she wasn’t asking him to do that, as surprised as he was grateful. “So he has the sun and the sky above him.”

“General, I—the men and I can only afford so much—” The best he’d thought of was the cheapest casket in the cheapest place in the city. Something tiny and moldy and the contrary to what Buccaneer was in life.

“You have nothing to afford. He was my subordinate, my soldier, my friend. I will deal with this, Miles. I owe it to him.” And to you. Regardless, that Olivier didn’t say. “But I do want you to help me, to agree on the details with me. After all, it was you who loved him best.”

They spent the rest of the day on those details, going over them as respectfully as they could, as quickly as they could once the hospital had provided them with a few brochures. And after everything had been settled and they had spoken to everyone they could about this, Miles was no longer sure it was him Buccaneer’s death that had affected the most. Olivier looked worse now than she had when Miles had come in earlier.
The days succeeded each other slowly—very slowly. Olivier had never spent this much time on a bed, and her body was starting to ache. The first day or so she hadn’t been allowed out of it, except for bathroom visits, which required someone to walk her. It was disastrously embarrassing, but she had put up with it anyway, as proudly as she’d been able to. Zinnia liked to watch her from a corner of the room and giggle like she was three instead of almost thirty. She must have been a funny sight, all things considered: half naked, half covered in bandages, an arm in elevation, and being carried bridal-style through the corridors by a man that was even taller than her and much wider.

Eventually, two of the beds in Olivier’s rooms were vacated. Their occupants hadn’t been in mortal danger, just sporting a few wounds here and there, and the third remained in silence, eyes closed. It was Olivier’s family that filled that room with life—Alex and Zinnia, always speaking over each other, putting up a show of normalcy and joy for her to believe.

Miles showed up from time to time, too. He spoke little and always mutedly, like he was afraid to be overheard or just not strong enough for raising his voice without reason. What he told her were the bits and pieces she had missed all these past weeks, being a prisoner of Central while he chased after shadows. She was glad for his words, because he didn’t sweeten the reality of anything. He told her of Scar as well, this shadow that had finally made himself visible. Both Ishvalans had taken to exchanging encounters, here and there, when no one was aware of it. They were home to each other in a foreign land. Neither had met anyone with their eyes, and looking into each other’s was like spilling poetry on an empty page. Olivier understood all too well, even though she had never lived anything like that before. Above all, she knew Miles had a pretty big hole to fill. A hole where once had stood Ishval, a hole where once had roamed Captain Buccaneer.

With time, Olivier was allowed to leave her bed for short periods of time and was free to walk around the hospital. It was an austere place that smelled like bleach and sickness, but there were more walking faces than heads on pillows, so she thought the Promised Day hadn’t been as destructive if these many were waking up, being reunited with the world they’d almost lost. Some, she knew only by sight. Some served under her. Familiar faces in the corridors saluted even if they didn’t have to when the general walked past them. Faces with scratches and faces without eyes and faces that would no longer be able to smile. This was the least obvious damage the war had done.

Sometimes, Zinnia sat with her after she got tired of walking. Zinnia had not left the hospital once in all this time, and Olivier hadn’t even tried to get her to. The nurses and doctors had all insisted that visitors needed to stay strong for the wounded and Zinnia had just told them she was dating an Armstrong that needed no additional strength. Except Olivier did.

Despite how hard she tried not to let it out, Olivier hadn’t emerged from the battle like a butterfly from its cocoon. Regaining her strength was not only being a slow process but a delicate one. Day by day, her legs grew stronger and she was capable of sitting up without feeling much pain in her torso, but her arm was still just there, a dead piece of meat that would take months, perhaps, to function as it once had. And she tired so very easily, she would have cried of frustration if she hadn’t known just how lucky she had been to not have died.

So Olivier just gritted her teeth and endured the doctor’s rants about her health, which they hoped she wouldn’t allow to decline by being obstinate and reckless. She lay in bed when told to and stood to take little strolls when allowed to, ate whatever they brought her and contented herself with that even though she was gradually getting hungrier, tried to sleep when the doctors turned off the lights, and didn’t dwell on what had happened because ‘she needed to focus on the future.’ A bright future, some said. Their city lay destroyed, in pieces, without a government to speak of, and they saw brightness up ahead. Olivier was only ever aware of one brightness and it was that of the people
accompanying her through this ordeal of a hospital stay.

Olivier lived like that as long as she could stand it. When the doctors finally discharged her, recommending the use of a cane for a few days (which she chose to ignore), she went straight to the Armstrong mansion. She would have to come back to the hospital in a few days for a new checkup, but her freedom was intact enough for her to accept it no questions asked.

Her father shook her hand as if she was some long-lost acquaintance waltzing back into his life, her mother only ever stared at her in disbelief, and Alex, idiot that he was, offered to carry her upstairs. She had to refuse him, her pride at stake, and simply took Zinnia’s arm. Once more, they were to exist in separate rooms. A lie that weighed heavier each passing day when Zinnia sneaked out of the guest room into Olivier’s and got in bed with her, right where she had always belonged.

The first night was not the hardest, but it did set a precedent.

Mumbling, the voices followed her, their pitches as diverse as their ghastly faces, pale as a dead man’s. Wherever she turned, fire surrounded her, and so did the voices.

They called names. Names she knew, names she wouldn’t forget. People she had lost. They called names and gunshots echoed them. And Olivier was only one woman, she couldn’t stand as a shield for these many people.

Ghastly bodies fell, too solid to be ghosts, and they were stocked in piles. They made a wall of dead meat that once had been a man’s body. It stank like only war does, the true poison of mankind. Poisons usually had the good sense of having a pretty carcass to show off to the world, but this one didn’t. War only ever smelled like death and decay. Destruction, death and decay. War was almost like a cycle. Life battles for life in a semi-circle, but when it ends abruptly, it becomes death. And death remains stale like water that’s about to freeze.

Olivier awoke to damp sheets and panting. Her own, she realized as she opened her eyes to the dark room. She had always felt estranged from this room as a teenager, but its familiarity helped her locate her surroundings and know she was in the closest place to home there was in miles and miles.

She awoke to Zinnia’s beautiful dark eyes, studying her just mere inch across.

“Nightmare?”

Her throat drier than usual, Olivier just nodded. Instinctively, she touched her arm, the one she still couldn’t use. It didn’t hurt her now, and yet she felt this … ache in the bone that was only just mending. A reminder.

“You wanna talk about it?”

When had Olivier ever wanted to talk about things? Once, maybe. Once, because she would have died without knowing if that first kiss was only just sexual attraction in disguise or something else.

“Come on,” Zinnia muttered softly, putting an arm around her shoulders to pull her close. Olivier liked to be enclosed by someone she loved and cherished, it was one of the few places in life she would pretend to be safe and fall for her own lie. “Get back to sleep.”

Olivier didn’t ignore the red flags in that sentence. There had been no ‘we’ involved in it. Just a suggestion.

“I’m a military woman,” she said. “Sleeping is the least of my concerns.” Even in times of peace, she had had trouble sleeping. This was not new to her. This was just the same old life, turned sourer than
usual by circumstance. But Zinnia… Zinnia fell asleep quickly and soundly every night without fail, and rarely woke up after a bad dream. “I worry about your nightmares more than I worry about mine.”

Olivier didn’t know what time it was, she only knew that it was late, that she had had her sleep interrupted by a nightmare and that Zinnia had already been awake before that.

Zinnia didn’t say anything. Her eyes spoke her mind well enough. There was no longer fire-strong rage in her, and there hadn’t been for days, but ashes can still burn.

“Worry about my anger.”

Still there, lurking somewhere, warm enough to bite and burn. Twice in the same week, Olivier had left her behind, cast her aside like a mere civilian. And she was none of that anymore. Briggs had taught her things mere civilians didn’t even know other people worried about. Zinnia had become something she had once feared and slightly hated, partly for love, partly because it had been the only road that hadn’t made the soles of her feet sizzle with indecision and lukewarmth. Olivier had no right to decide for her.

And, what was more important, Olivier was well aware.

“I promised I wouldn’t pull you out again like that.”

But Zinnia only heard ‘like that’. Twice, time after time. Once, to keep her safe. The second, to keep her alive. Because a war was going on over their heads. There were many ways to push someone away that didn’t involve any of that. Secrets, confidential information, thoughts that were deemed unimportant and not worthy of bothering a significant other for. Curious by nature and more curious by circumstance, Zinnia yearned to know Olivier, front and back, back and forth, until Olivier was as transparent as clear water: still retaining its form and nature, but crystalline.

“I’m not a soldier,” Zinnia said. “And I know that because of that you feel like you have to stop including me. I know you will do it again if it comes to it, no matter what you’ve promised.”

Olivier had the good sense of not saying anything, at least. But what could she say? That she wouldn’t save Zinnia’s life if the chance arose? This argument would never go anywhere, even if Olivier refused to engage in it.

After a while, Zinnia just sighed and pulled her close. Olivier suspected it gave her a sense of security, to have something solid and warm and alive against her chest, a heart beating close to a heart.

“How long has it been?” Zinnia asked, her lips very close to the crown of Olivier’s head. “Since I … stopped being who I used to be for you?”

She spoke of the past, a past distant enough that Olivier had trouble going back to it this late at night, with her brain still thrashing violently at her because of her dream. A past she had lived once as carelessly as she planned to live whatever her future held for her.

Beer in the sunlight of a tiny square, the burdens of her work life put aside for a moment to just soak in all the full force of the spring, a beautiful newcomer running after thin white pieces of paper with a melting ice-cream cone in her hand.

A different life.

Olivier hadn’t known, then, that Drachma would one day be the last thing she should worry about.
She hadn’t known this girl in the short yellow flower dress and the ice cream would be in her bed, fingers weaving Olivier’s hair into slapdash shapes because she didn’t know how to braid.

She had had no idea that her life would change so much in such a short period of time.

She had been blind to the fact that in only a year she would fix things with her brother enough to tell him she was proud of him.

Olivier thought back to those times and wanted to take herself to a corner of the shade and tell her everything slowly, so she would be prepared for it all.

A year had gone by, and this Olivier had nothing to do with the woman who one day had reprimanded a stranger for selling written words in a town square.

“A year?” Olivier said. “I don’t know. Feels longer to me.” She smiled. So much change, and such a little amount of lived days to show for it. “We sleep less now.”

Zinnia breathed out and the vibrations of the air coming out of her felt like ocean waves to Olivier.

“A year…” she muttered. “Things do change in a year.”

“Things change in a day, too,” Olivier replied softly. One single day had the power to send every step taken towards progress flying back years, one day took lives and shattered whole streets. One day marked endings and beginnings alike. Its change was abrupter than a year’s, and whatever damage it left behind was harder to reconstruct into something salvageable.

“Sometimes, now, I don’t know if I would want to go back to being your daily distraction,” Zinnia said in low voice, reminiscing. “To the sweet bliss of only having to worry about you compressing my existence to nothingness.”

Just a girl, sitting in a chair and writing forbidden stories. A woman towering above her, exuding power and authority, and yet still lacking the ability to make that girl stop. Although the girl had been afraid often. And then … more than just afraid.

“You’ve never been that. And I was never going to,” Olivier told her, finally. Whatever they’d been, they’d been more than just rivals or enemies. They’d looked at each too eagerly, in what little privacy they were able to find, to be just friends, but stayed apart too long to be lovers at first sight. Whatever they had been, they had been words before they had been anything else, though.

Olivier had been words to Zinnia before she’d been a mystery. And Zinnia had been written scribbles in every flat-enough surface long before she’d been her favorite thing about Iver.

“What am I now?” Zinnia said. “Because you are the woman I want to yell at for thinking her life matters less than mine.”

Always. Zinnia had plenty to yell about. The fact that she didn’t showed how little she wanted to make the bridge between her and Olivier less and less transitable.

Olivier rolled over to look Zinnia in the eye and ask just one thing of her:

“Let it go—”

“—It doesn’t.” It never could. Olivier’s life… was worth a thousand of hers. The things she had done for her people when no one was watching never ceased to make Zinnia’s heart shiver. “Just because you signed up to die if that’s what your country asked of you doesn’t mean you have to.”
Zinnia began to tear up as discreetly as she could. She wasn’t sleeping lately because all she saw when she closed her eyes was one thing, just one thing. The most terrible image her brain had ever conjured. *Just because you signed up to die, that doesn’t mean you should want to.* “And if you have to, I’m going down with you.” Zinnia bit her lower lip and the tears that were rolling over it. She bit her lip so hard it might bleed. And she looked Olivier in the eye. “Next time, I’m going down with you, Olivier.” Zinnia no longer hid her tears, they smeared her face wet. And she no longer hid what plagued her, what didn’t let her sleep, what terrified her when closing her eyes. “I’d rather die by your side than spend the rest of my life replaying your death in my nightmares.”

Chapter End Notes

Despite how much it displeases Present Me, Past Me wanted you to know that Olivier is only alive here because Past Me had too much planned post-Promised Day. Otherwise, if Past Me had been writing this without an ancient outline, my beloved Olivier would be dead and buried. Idk when exactly, but it is true that there was a point the story was asking me to. I didn’t listen, of course. It’s *my* story, it can whisper in my ear all it wants, I call the shots here XD. Related to this, I have discovered I have a knack for killing characters off, it is very enjoyable (but my friend Hikari won’t let me do it too much, she says it’s unbecoming).

Now, on to references, “Don't cry over me, you'll be crying all day” is a paraphrase of "Don't weep for the stupid, you'll be crying all day", from *Hellsing Abridged*, a YouTube parody of the Hellsing series. And "Everybody knows this", despite being a normal thing to say, I wrote with *One Day At A Time* in mind, a lovely sitcom about a close-knit family in which it's a recurrent utterance.
March 27th marked the beginning of a warm spring, following the footsteps of the last as many had feared. Clear blues skies all over Central, not a single cloud marring all that immensity, and the sun shining pleasantly over fields and hills and flowers. It was a perfect day to leave one’s home and venture into the landscapes the city surroundings had to offer. Nothing one would expect of a day that included a funeral.

Silence reigned where spring should have, from the second Olivier had put on her uniform—pressed and ironed for the occasion, her medals shining under the light—and gotten inside the car. It wasn’t the Armstrong family car, and it wasn’t driven by their chauffeur either. Her parents wouldn’t have understood, and there were services one could hire for this very thing. The funeral home had sent a vehicle, fit already with an occupied casket, and Olivier had waited for it alongside with Zinnia. They had been assured space would not be a problem.

Even though they both fit comfortably at the back, neither felt comfortable. A friend rested a very short distance from them, a friend that, had he been sitting with them, would not have let silence swallow away any words they might have wanted to say.

But Olivier didn’t want to speak. She didn’t think anything in the world needed to be said today until Buccaneer’s casket was six feet under. Any sound would ruin the solemnity, the attempt at honoring him, even if it was with the thing he had hated most.

And he would have hated that Miles wasn’t in this car with them, too. Olivier wouldn’t have dared assume otherwise. But Miles hadn’t wanted to face anything so soon and had told her he would be meeting her at the location they both had agreed on.

Buccaneer would have fought and thrashed until Miles had, reluctantly, changed his plans for him. Olivier smiled faintly; he would have made a scene and she would have had to silence him, punished him to go stand near a pillar and be still as if he was a poorly-behaved boy instead of a sixty-year-old man. Now Buccaneer wasn’t even moving.

Zinnia held her hand halfway there, but she didn’t say anything. In the end, this wasn’t for Buccaneer, this was for all he had left behind, alone in a world he should be filling with loud laughter and gossip. The dead couldn’t care less about flower arrangements and decorations and an audience, after all. Only the living could truly make anything out of a funeral.

Olivier squeezed Zinnia’s hand and kept looking out of the window, at the passing miles of four-story buildings that gave way to fields and villages and, eventually, the hill covered in green that would mark, truly, the end of an era.

The car came to a halt at the bottom of the hill. A few people had already congregated there. All of their faces were etched in Olivier’s memory because they were faces she knew she could have lost, too. Their uniforms, matching hers, almost drew her to stand next to them, as one of them. The title she bore held her back. And the hand in the small of her back, gently pushing her towards them once she and Zinnia had exited the car, moved her forward, finally.

“Come on,” Zinnia whispered. “Go.”
But Olivier wouldn’t let her stand back and grabbed her hand again. They reunited with their friends together, joined the idle chitchat about the end of the war—something only soldiers who had fought in it could do—and spoke of the near future. Olivier invited them to her family home for her sister Catherine’s birthday two days from then and they felt honored by the proposition. It was a way to include them in a life she once would have kept secret from most of them. But some of these men had been the ones to find her on the floor, not dead but almost. There was so very little she could and wanted to hide from them.

“It’s good to see you up and about, general,” they told her. They had feared for her, it seemed. But they smiled as if their worry had been dissipated and this was only a step towards regaining the old views they held from her. “We’re glad to see you rested and well.”

She refrained from adding that, indeed, she had rested, but that she wasn’t well as they’d said she couldn’t truly say.

“Likewise,” she said instead. One hundred and fifty. Those were the men that had survived the Promised Day. About one hundred of them had perished for her. They already lay buried in other hills, in other places. These one hundred and fifty had been to most of the funerals already, but they had come for the last as well. The last dead soldier to be put to rest.

One hundred and fifty alive… So much mourning would accumulate in their hearts that, perhaps, the grief wouldn’t feel as lonely. They had come here today despite all that to honor a fallen friend. To honor Briggs’s brightest soul as it should be honored. As she couldn’t have honored before.

One hundred and forty-nine souls. Because amidst all the known faces and all that blue, there was a particularly tall and slender silhouette she hadn’t laid eyes on.

“Where’s Miles?” Zinnia asked her, having arrived to the same conclusion.

Miles, Buccaneer’s right hand and best friend. The man who, in Olivier’s words, had loved him best—and that no one dared doubt. Gone from his best friend’s funeral like the frost when spring shines at its warmest. There was no frost in Miles’s heart, Olivier knew. There was no space for hate in that man’s heart, nor fear. She imagined that these days few things would cloud that heart, and one of them they would bury today.

“He must be running late,” she said.

“No, look!” Zinnia said. She had looked up at the hill where a six-foot deep hole had been dug, soon to be filled, and had seen a standing figure of a man. “There he is.”

Olivier exhaled slowly. So he had come, after all.

“Keep these idiots entertained,” she told Zinnia. “I’m going to talk to him.”

Zinnia nodded enthusiastically. If Olivier needed her to become a high-spirited puppy for her, she knew Zinnia would do it in an instant. Especially today. They all sensed without need for words that Miles had taken this to heart, had suffered it most intensely, but they all were aware that next to his pain was Olivier’s. She felt extremely thankful today for having someone to support her, to hold her hand, to attract all the small talk so she could have a conversation that no one else should hear.

The hill was steep and muddy from day-old rain, and Olivier was still recovering from her wounds. When her chest heaved to take in air, her broken and bruised ribs pained her, but she pressed on regardless.

Miles had his back turned to the scene below of people reuniting after days apart in hospitals or
visiting one another, going to funerals. What he was so fixated on, Olivier had no idea. His eyes were set on the horizon, where blue met green, and he had his hands behind his back. In appearance, Miles seemed to be at peace, just waiting like she was waiting. But she knew enough about Miles’s life to understand that it was only his same-old façade. He had never known peace on Amestrian lands.

“I was wondering where you were,” she said, loud enough so he would hear.

He turned a little to see who it was, despite her voice being recognizable, and nodded at her for all greetings.

“Just familiarizing myself,” he said. *With where he will dwell forever,* she added in her mind. It was subtext. Miles would go north one day and leave Buccaneer’s last remains back here, in a place he never loved. He wanted to commit this to memory, so parting with it wouldn’t hurt as much.

She walked the distance between them to stand next to him, in front of the hole. Dark soil crowded the ground beneath their feet, just right there in their reach. Nothing like the green they stood on. This was the reality all men face—a final darkness that no amount of color can truly conceal.

“Miles,” Olivier said. “Will you carry his casket with me?”

He took one good look at her and couldn’t gather enough will to refuse her. He couldn’t let his general haul an entire casket on one arm and then walk up this hill without help, even if she was an Armstrong.

“He would want me to,” Miles said. “He wouldn’t let me allow you to do it alone.”

“I’m not alone,” Olivier said. “Some other men will help me. But I wanted you standing with me as we bring him here.”

Because Miles belonged there. It was an indisputable fact, something that everyone knew even if they had never been told. Wherever Buccaneer had gone in life, Miles had followed him closely, whether to guard him from evil, as Olivier so often had tried to do, or because he was that easily talked into anything if it was Buccaneer doing the talking. If this was Miles’s funeral, she was sure Buccaneer would have insisted on carrying the casket on his own.

“Is it time, then?” he asked. “Is that why you came up here?”

“We have all the time in the world. It will be time when you say it is time.”

Miles only stared at her, unsure of what to say. They had planned this together, so he knew there was no service, no priest to say a few benevolent yet empty words begging some god to welcome Buccaneer’s soul, as if that soul would ever leave Fort Briggs where it had dwelled for years on end and always would in his absence. If Miles wanted to delay this, he could. He could just stand there in the breeze with his general and nothing would happen other than people would just go home, bored and tired of a spectacle that didn’t come. And yet … he didn’t want to wait any longer.

“Then it is time.”

Olivier stared back at him for a moment, then she nodded, and they both descended the hill they were soon to climb again.

A few men joined them and, in procession, they slowly began walking up that green hill in the middle of nowhere, far from Central’s fumes and pollution. Olivier felt about to cave in because of the weight. She was in no state to be doing this, and she knew, but she would die and be buried here
too if she was going to let someone else take her rightful place. She had been the unwilling executor, she would put this man’s body under the ground herself. Olivier carried her load of this weight on one shoulder and bit her lip, pushed all dizziness and exhaustion away, and took every step in sync with her soldiers. In prayer, in apology.

Behind them, a trail of many people followed them, Zinnia among them. Austin, too. The doctor at Briggs. Friends, well-known friends. They were the reason Olivier didn’t fall, and she could have. She kept walking because they would send the thought of Buccaneer flying if she was in any danger. And today was a day to remember him, not pity and coddle her.

Finally and carefully, Miles and her rested Buccaneer’s casket near the hole and opened it. They had asked the funeral home to preserve the body for today, and they had delivered flawlessly.

Buccaneer looked the most peaceful he ever had in his life and Olivier could only wonder if this was what his face had looked like when he’d slept, fully submerging himself into tranquility for once, into silence and rest. He had been dressed in his uniform, a few shades darker than the sky that the universe had readied for him today, eyes closed, and his hands had been placed delicately together over his chest, as if he was holding an invisible sword.

_We should have asked for his crocodile automail to be buried with him instead of his normal arm_, Olivier thought. But it was too late now for that.

She had remembered to order a tombstone, at least. It would be properly installed after. She, for one, didn’t want to look at it. Just the thought of his name being written anywhere that wasn’t Miles’s assignment lists was outrageous to think about. When Olivier got back home, she would have one placed in the fort’s cemetery as well. A bigger one, to make up for all those feet and bulk of man that had been lost to war.

Olivier remembered Buccaneer’s whole trajectory at her fort. Every day spent under her command he had spent teasing her for some thing or the other, pouting in disbelief when she had kept him off the fire like he was some little boy that had to be shied away from electrical outlets. Olivier had devoted every waking second of her life to protect him as she would have her own son, if she’d ever had any. Because some nights she’d still dreamed about him bleeding from his shoulder socket, leaving a trail of red in the white snow. She had cut him off spying at the border, assigned him to the map-making section so he would never meet Drachman fire again, disappointed him as often as she could to keep him from endangering himself. Olivier had kept him close for fifteen years, close where she could see and run to his rescue, always in sight, never too far, always in her heart, never in her missions. She had filed for his retirement despite no one in the military truly taking that seriously, found him a home he had more or less agreed to. And he had died anyway. Olivier had relaxed, lowered her guard, thinking him safe already, thinking he was retired already, when all he had been was cannon fodder.

Then Miles spoke, barely loud enough for all the people there to hear, but surely, like he didn’t care who was listening. Because he didn’t. These words were nothing, the wind would take them away, and Buccaneer would never listen to _his_ story, when he had told so many over the years.

“Julian,” he began, “was a man moved by love. Despite convention and appearance, love was always one of the most important aspects of life for him, side by side with family. And this came from a man who had neither. He spent most of his days north, at Briggs. So, in truth if not in fact, we were his family, and he loved us.”

The silence that had settled when the day had dawned revered him for breaking it with this at last.

“Julian poured everything he had into his job. He was a soldier without fear, who walked into war
with barely enough ammunition and numbers to win, and yet walked back to the fort with one arm less and one more victory than he’d had the day before. He was devoted to his job to that extent, but there was one aspect of his life he was a worshipper of, something that escaped his devotion and became something much more sacred. It was the people who worked with him that brightened his life, and all those lives he brightened, too. But there was one person in particular that Buccaneer had always had present.”

The silence thanked him for saying the things about Buccaneer that no one ever said in the same sentence, because all they had been able to focus on was something else, something that was never drenched in life and never was accompanied by nice words.

“Julian,” Miles said, “cared so much about our general that he orchestrated the biggest strategy under our sun to find her happiness. He cared so much it was contagious. He made us all love what he hoped to one day gift our general with: love like he hadn’t known. In doing that, he stoically put up with her complaints until it looked like he didn’t even hear them. He never got any praise from her, but he loved her enough not to care, and at the end of the day she was the reason he abandoned his feud with Drachma over a lost arm to come here.”

The silence whistled into Olivier’s ears. Her heart sank deep into her chest. Miles spoke so much truth… She never had praised him, thanked him for all he had done in the shadows for her. Always for her. She had been too busy making sure he never did something that could kill him to notice him trying to do something that made her happy.

“And Julian… Julian filled the world with words. With gossip. With laughter and jokes and ideas. It was all he knew how to do. He spoke and the world was suddenly quiet because it wanted to listen. His stories traveled the fort before he could even notice. He told them to us when spirits were low and the wind blew heavy. He spoke to us when we needed something to propel us forward. He always had lessons to share with others, stories that came from life and stories that he had borrowed and turned into something unique, a present that was tailored to us to perfection. Julian Buccaneer was noise. And today the world is quiet, not because it wants to listen, but because his noise can’t ever be replaced. And any other noise is not worth listening to.”

The silence knew that Miles had never imagined he would ever miss that noise so much, but he did.

Grief would never be a thing from the past, not after this prophesied month of 1915, but life did go on. Buccaneer had been finally lowered to the ground and buried and everyone had left. Olivier had visited the doctor enough to see how her arm and bruises were doing. And Zinnia had stopped hoping to get through a night without dreaming of death. But life had to go on.

Life, too, found ways to celebrate when no one really wanted to. With everyone out of the hospital, there were no excuses. When Philip Armstrong announced his daughter’s birthday party would be held as it had been every year before and the invitations were sent through the mail (given that the radios and telephones still didn’t work at their hundred percent yet), he allowed no justifications. Even so, many declined. No aristocrat wanted to leave their homes, apparently, until they felt they had a safe government above them once again. Some people just wouldn’t know how to bask in the chaos, they’d lived under the illusion of order all their lives.

Olivier offered her distraught father a solution, and soon the man’s spirits rose so high she feared having done the wrong thing. But a party had no reason to be lonely, and she didn’t want it to be such a thing.
On the occasion itself, the house shone as if polished to extremes. The fine cutlery had been sheathed from inside the drawers, the tablecloths decorated to cater to the sights of all attendees, and food prepared to delight every tongue it would touch.

She and Zinnia hid in her room, as always. Although the party had begun not long ago, Olivier hadn’t wanted to be there from the beginning. As far as she knew, no sibling of hers had made it yet, and this was Catherine’s day, after all. She didn’t need Olivier acting as her shadow and, as ever, as the family’s disappointment.

“I look like a pumpkin, don’t I?” Zinnia was saying, standing in front of the mirror in a honey-orange dress Olivier had found in one of her mother’s wardrobes. It was a three-layered skirt with tiny black beads and stones on the hem of each layer and a thin silk jacket that covered about half of the long almost-white sleeves. It did not, as a matter of fact, make Zinnia look like a pumpkin in the slightest. But, used to the much livelier and shorter dresses Zinnia normally wore everywhere, this was indeed a sight to behold.

The mirror would have swallowed Zinnia whole if it had been able to, Olivier was sure. And Olivier would have, too, if there weren’t so many people downstairs waiting for her.

“You look like new-money,” Olivier said instead, ruffling gently Zinnia’s almost shoulder-length hair. It had grown so much lately, she couldn’t believe she hadn’t paid any attention to that. “My parents will love you.”

Her parents would have loved anything that had been assigned female at birth wearing a dress, especially when their own daughter was just about to show up at a family event wearing a tuxedo and a top hat, the very image of an aristocrat male at the time.

But Zinnia didn’t focus on that—she had already helped Olivier into the jacket and done all the buttons of her shirt for her, occasionally losing her way because of the sights below the fabric.

“Won’t your parents think it … weird?” she said. “That I’m not somewhere else? You wouldn’t exactly need an adjutant in a birthday party.”

“I need you at this birthday party,” Olivier said, planting a small kiss on Zinnia’s neck. “The rest is history.”

“If you’re so sure…” Her voice trailed off as Olivier lingered on that very same spot of her neck, now oversensitive with anticipation. Olivier had a gift in her lips and she only ever used it when she knew it would get her what she wanted. And Zinnia would have given her that and more. “But there’ll be no turning back.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?” she asked, fully aware of what could and would, most likely, happen. She just couldn’t bother to care. This had been her home, once. She had hidden long enough. Alex was right, it was time to fix things, make them right.

“Me having to run and falling because this dress is narrow.”

Olivier didn’t laugh. She rolled her eyes at Zinnia in the mirror.

“I thought you wanted this,” she said.

“And I did. I wanted to be open about this. I didn’t go through hell so many times, some of which because of your stubborn suicidal ass, to just be the adjutant. Fake adjutant.” Zinnia’s conviction melted like ice cream in the sun. “But… I understand why we pulled that off.”
“To be safe.”

Zinnia held back a groan.

“Please don’t say that word around me.”

Olivier ignored her.

“We’re safe now,” she said. “The war is over, Bradley is dead, there’s no authority that could punish me for anything I’ve ever done. It’s just my parents.”

Once, that would have terrified her. Now she had an arm in a sling, one hundred men less, and one more victory in her pocket. Soon, she would leave this wrecked province and go back home, never to return. Her brother already knew, having had the same secret to keep from people. She didn’t want to go on hiding Zinnia in a uniform and a pleasant but impersonal ‘please’. She wanted to parade her, because she had almost lost her too many times in just one day, and now she had her back at her side. Despite everything, Zinnia was still here. Olivier would be a fool to let an old fear push her away.

Zinnia kept her silence with the one purpose to let Olivier be aware of one tiny little fact:

“There’s a whole lot of people down there that aren’t ‘just’ your parents.”

Her eyes said: They will talk.

And didn’t Olivier know that well? Hadn’t she lived among gossipmongers? Among creatures that thrived in putting others down when they couldn’t hear or defend themselves. Hadn’t she grown up used to chitchat?

“Let them talk, then. But tonight I will give them a reason to.”

Zinnia turned around and faced Olivier, hands around her neck, careful not to touch Olivier’s broken arm with her own. It was a moment of deaf intimacy when the rest of the world was purposely being loud, waiting, lurking.

“Is this why you insisted so much on me wearing this … thing? Do you want your whole family and all of your acquaintances to see your girlfriend and think ‘pumpkin!’ so they won’t even notice I’m, you know, your girlfriend?”

“More than just that. I told that nurse you were as good as my wife.”

“I remember…” Zinnia blushed.

“I want to say it again. To all these people. And I want them to talk about that for years. Because, for once, they will be talking about something that matters.” Like a spider approaches a pray caught in its sticky nets, Olivier leaned in closer to Zinnia until her breath was part of her own. “Because I want them to know it is you I love. Not those boys my parents chose for me, not any of my soldiers or any of my superiors. It’s you, a flower girl that donned my colors to be with me, a girl that could have run so many times and instead chooses not to.”

Zinnia cupped Olivier’s face with her hand.

“Because I love you. And that matters more to me than running.” She smiled a sad smile. “I have nowhere left to run, Olivier. This is it, you’re it. I don’t care about what the rest of the world has to offer. In fact, I don’t even want to know.”
“Amestris is not an especially large country,” Olivier muttered. “But it is diverse. There’s the mountains of the north, snowed-in even at this time of year; the prairies of the central regions, greener and covered in flowers in the spring and summer; there’s the—

“Shhhhh…”

Zinnia put her finger on Olivier’s lips and Olivier stopped talking as if someone had pushed a button to turn off the light.

“Just hold my hand, okay?” she whispered. “Hold my hand and don’t get angry at their reactions. Will you give me that?”

And Olivier just nodded and took Zinnia’s right hand in her left.

Olivier would get the world to stop spinning on its axis, the sun to burst out in flames until its heat faded into space, the earth to grow another continent as if a terrifyingly large volcano had erupted, if Zinnia asked for any of those things.

On the way down the stairs, Olivier had to cling to Zinnia’s arm instead of just her hand. Every time she had to descend those stairs, she thought it had grown an extra step or two. Today, in these strange shoes she had not worn in many, many years, it took a little extra amount of time to get to the ground floor, where the buoyancy of these many people under one roof buzzed like two bees pollinating the same flower.

Nobody stopped their talking to look at the eldest Armstrong walk into the living room, its sofas and tables having been put away in other rooms so that there would be more space, hand-in-hand with a woman.

“I don’t know half of these people…” Zinnia whispered nervously. Her hands had begun to sweat, but Olivier had only held on tighter to the one she was holding.

“Friends of the family,” Olivier said. “Mostly my father’s.”

They approached the table at the center of the room to get some drinks and finally Olivier could greet some people, some of which she hadn’t seen since the late years of her childhood. Many had plenty of compliments for the woman she had become, still regarding her as a child of sorts, unaccompanied by a man to solidify her. None stayed too long, preoccupied, of course, with their little reunions and discussions about the political climate.

When a familiar face popped up in the crowd, Olivier was courteous:

“If you’ll excuse me…”

Once they were a few paces away, Zinnia said:

“Wow, I have never seen you this blasé about anything. Is it those painkillers they’re giving you for the arm?”

“It’s called manners.”

“And where were those manners … I don’t know, pick any moment in your entire career as a general and a girlfriend.”

“Being a girlfriend is not a career path.”
“It should be…” Zinnia muttered under her breath.

She forced herself to smile, since a woman was right before them, nursing a glass of champagne. She was short and on the plump side, which would have made her almost invisible in this crowd if she hadn’t been distinctly waiting for Olivier to finish her conversation.

“I was hoping you find you here, child,” the woman said.

And, to Zinnia’s surprise, Olivier showed no aversion whatsoever to being called ‘child’.

“This room might not know to which extent,” she continued to say, “but you’re the reason this city is still in one piece.”

Some of it, anyway.

There was a certain … glimmer in the woman’s eyes—blue like a cloudless sky—that resonated within Zinnia. On a closer look, she was plenty more familiar than Zinnia would have given her credit for. Those blue eyes, her graying blonde hair, tucked in a tense bun, with only one stray lock curving into a curl and framing her forehead. Zinnia knew that curl. Only Armstrong hair did that. This must be Olivier’s aunt, only seen in very rare occasions.

“I wasn’t the one to uncover it all,” Olivier said, not willing to take a compliment that wasn’t entirely her merit having deserved. “I just took part in fighting against it, that’s all.”

“Nonsense, child,” her aunt said. “You’re an Armstrong. You should be proud to have brought that name a little more than just money and bad reputation. This family and this city can learn a great deal from you, no matter if you were the one to slice this coup in two or just the one who gave the order to have that done.”

She reached out to gently pat Olivier’s hand, the one that hung from the sling.

“I’m glad to see you here, aunt,” Olivier just said. “I’m glad to see you haven’t changed much. How’s business?”

“Selling like flowers,” the woman said, bursting into laughter.

Zinnia laughed as well, but only so she wouldn’t be the only one standing there not doing so.

Olivier quickly leaned to her ear.

“Her cover is a flower stall.”

Quieting down, Olivier’s aunt went on talking.

“It’s good, child, very good. I wouldn’t be here otherwise. No one here can recognize me after so long.” The woman gave a chuckle. “Well, except probably that gentleman over there.” She pointed at the opposite side of the room, where a man in a tuxedo was putting a tiny flower in the hair of his date. “What’s his name, Mustang, isn’t it? The one you had me warn.”

Olivier could only nod. She hadn’t expected Mustang to show up. He’d been invited, just like everyone else that had survived the Promised Day under her orders, but he didn’t do this sort of thing, and he probably wouldn’t ever want to be associated with her in the future, after the chaos that had ensued after their one-time allegiance. Her course of action had momentarily taken away his sight and some of his friends.
“Men like him always know, after all…” the woman said, mostly to herself.

When Olivier wanted to return to her aunt and say something back, she found that the woman had already left. She was so shocked she couldn’t even notice the fact that she had said not even a word about Zinnia and her hand being entwined with Olivier’s. Instead, the two of them moved towards Mustang and who, she found out as they got closer, was Lieutenant Hawkeye in an elaborate hairdo that kept all of her ashen blonde locks away from her face and a glistening dress.

“General Armstrong!” Mustang said happily as soon as he spotted her. “Miss Erwin.”

“Mustang. Hawkeye.”

“Colonel,” Zinnia said. “Lieutenant.”

Riza only just nodded as a greeting. She tried to subtly move away from Mustang, but he insisted on keeping his hand around her waist.

“Made quite an entrance, haven’t you?” he told Olivier. “I looked for you earlier, you were nowhere to be found.”

“We were upstairs, preparing.”

Mustang regarded her as if he was imagining other things rather than the two of them preparing for the party. With the mind that he had and all he had already been witness to, it was no wonder, really.

“I thought you had lost your sight, Mustang,” Olivier said. Those eyes were gazing at her and Zinnia holding hands much too lively not to be seeing the gesture.

“A very kind doctor had the good will to see to my ailment,” he said, and added in a lower voice: “The power of a Philosopher’s Stone is as great as it is rumored.”

“Dangerous words, colonel.”

“Indeed.”

They stared at each other quietly, general and colonel alike. The news that had spread all over the country pointed at the two of them as the heroes of the Promised Day, the ones that had put a stop to whatever alchemical plans Central had seen fail and ruin their capital city. Right now, because the people in this house cared very little for heroism, no eyes followed them up close, but out there in the streets of the city, they were nothing but celebrities. Olivier wondered if things would have been for the worst if she hadn’t found an ally in Mustang.

“How is your arm, general?” Riza asked her politely.

“Much better, thank you. And your wounds?”

Riza smiled. “Healing. I can barely feel the stitches anymore.”

“You look well, lieutenant,” Zinnia added.

She looked more than well, actually. Despite the stitches that covered her neck and shoulder beneath the black shawl she was wearing to cover it up, Riza’s face was glowing with happiness. Maybe it had something to do with the proximity of the colonel’s body and his hand bravely pulling her closer.

“I was lucky,” Riza said. “I received medical attention on the very battlefield. Others weren’t so fortunate.”
Many others, to be accurate. Fallen anywhere, their eyes left for the wind to close. But Olivier chose now to focus on the positives, the fact that she had seen to their burials and that she could stand here today, with friends and what was left of her family, and try to put that wretched day behind her.

“Thank you for honoring my invitation,” she said. “My father would have been greatly saddened to see his daughter’s party fail to attract guests.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” Riza said. “It doesn’t hurt to get out from time to time, isn’t that right, Roy?”

Mustang made a face but didn’t contradict her, changing the subject instead.

“Ed and Al send you their apologies, but they couldn’t make it,” he said.

Olivier nodded. She had imagined they wouldn’t. Finally, those two children had recovered the bodies they had lost long enough ago. She understood that the last place they would want to be was here, somewhere this frilly for something as absurd as someone else’s party. They had plenty of life to catch up on, those two.

“They’ve gone home at last,” Mustang added. “After their journey, I can’t imagine they would have waited any longer. They are still children, despite everything.”

Both Elrics were over fifteen now, older than Olivier’s youngest sister. She wouldn’t deny them their youth, but she no longer considered them children. They had fought the nearest thing to a god and won when nobody else could win. One thing was clear and that was that they both had seen too much to still retain any remnant of childhood and innocence. It was their home where they belonged now.

The fixing of the world fell onto the adults. They owed it to those two kids to see to it and do a better job than the ones that had come before.

“I will send word to them, thanking them for their service,” Olivier said.

“It’s what’s next, isn’t it?” Mustang said. “Reaching out, building something new from the ashes and rumble.”

Olivier smiled tensely.

“How long have you been out of the hospital?” she asked.

“A few days.”

“Is everyone else?”

He paled. “No, I don’t think they are.”

“Then how do you plan on rebuilding anything?”

“Little by little. Believe it or not, general, I have thought about this. A new world, in which the government is fair and just and alchemy is used as a tool of restoration, not destruction.”

“That sounds very much like a utopia. Many will still believe the senior staff had nothing to do with what happened. Many will still believe those men were giving fair and just orders.”

“Maybe we can make them believe otherwise, with time.”

“We?”
“Why, of course!” Mustang said, surprised. “You didn’t think I was going to do all of that alone? I’ll need people like you on my side. A vote will have to take place. Peace will return to Amestris.”

Olivier chuckled loudly.

“You’re running for Führer? Oh, you must be proud.”

But he, instead of getting offended, just put a hand on her left shoulder.

“And you can run too,” he said. “Anyone who wishes to can. Democracy will decide the fate of the country.”

She laughed again. He seemed surprised.

“Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted?” he asked.

“You have no idea what I want, Mustang,” she said, then nodded at Hawkeye, and Zinnia and her left the two of them alone to chew on that.

Running for Führer… She would have kept laughing if she didn’t want to sound demented to all these people. Once, she might have craved that power, that control, because it would have allowed her to protect many more people with her actions. But now she didn’t wish that seat on anyone. Mustang, of course, young as he was, still felt like the power of it would suit him. But power weights more and more as time goes by and handling is no joke. If he wanted it, though, she wouldn’t stand in his way.

“He’s so like you,” Zinnia said when they’d walked away.

“You think so?”

“Definitely, he’s been out of the hospital for a few days and he’s already thinking about work.”

But Olivier hadn’t been thinking about work, she had been thinking about her old life and everyone who had had a place in it. She’d been waiting to be able to get back to it and leave Central behind, not rule supreme over the province.

“He’s an asshole and I’m not,” she just said, as if that made all the difference.

“Depends on the kind of day you’re having,” Zinnia joked.

“Come on,” Olivier said, ignoring her. “Let’s find my family. They must be wondering where I am.”

Even if they weren’t, Olivier just wanted to wish her sister a happy birthday and go drink champagne to the terrace with Zinnia. She had talked far too much in a short span of time and was tired of pretending to be polite.

Zinnia didn’t let go of Olivier’s hand when she saw a gathering of blond heads near the door to the terrace. She wanted to, to protect something that no one really wanted safe and snuggled up in the depths of a secret anymore, but it didn’t matter what she wanted. This wasn’t her family, she didn’t want to have any say about how Olivier approached this. So she was brave and didn’t let go, not even for a second.

She had wished for this moment… longer than she remembered. Selfishly, she’d wanted it when Olivier hadn’t, and she had contented herself with only Buccaneer and Miles knowing until Olivier had gifted her with going public in front of the whole fort. But coming out to one’s family after years
of oppression and fear was a very different story. They didn’t love her, they didn’t owe her as much loyalty as Briggs did. If they so saw fit, they might never allow Olivier inside this house ever again. They might cross her out of the testaments. And then she would truly be the back sheep of the family. Not that she cared.

Living after this war had changed Olivier in ways that would take Zinnia a long time to fathom out. Her stride was confident, her grip on Zinnia’s hand appropriate and affectionate, and when she stood in front of the entire Armstrong family, her fingers didn’t even shake a little.

Gwendolyn, Philip, Alex and Catherine, Zinnia knew. But the two women with curlier golden hair, hand-in-hand with their respective husbands, she imagined were Amue and Strongine.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Olivier said. “I would like to introduce my girlfriend, Zinnia.”

Catherine gave a little giggle. She was in the right age to giggle at the word ‘girlfriend’. Amue and Strongine smiled pleasantly, although their mouths had a tint of displeasure in them, and shook Zinnia’s hands very much courteously. Alex just beamed, exuding his utmost pride for his older sister, which Olivier tried not to take too seriously; he would have been proud for her doing literally anything. Philip, ever distracted and unobservant, also shook Zinnia’s hands and he didn’t hide his gigantic smile, this time not at all coming from pride but joy. After all, he had been trying to set Olivier up with literally anyone and his little girl had found a partner all on her own. But Gwendolyn… Gwendolyn Armstrong gave a shrill scream like someone had torn off one of her toe nails.

“You’re dating your adjutant???” she said in the same shrill voice.

“She’s not my adjutant. That was just pretend.”

“Oh sweet lord…” Gwendolyn said right before fainting as dramatically as only women in novels written by men did, straight into the arms of her husband, who reanimated her soon enough with little taps on her cheeks.

When she opened her eyes again, he barely left her any time to stand before he dropped her.

“You’re daughter is one of those depraved people, Philip!”

“Get over it, Gwendolyn. She’s not depraved. Can you not see the look in her eye?” He smiled again and Olivier felt a warmth spreading in the center of her body. “Our daughter is, quite simply, in love.”

Olivier tried to contain her feelings. Her father had just… defied his wife for the first time since she had memory of the two of them. He had simply taken her statement and jetted it away, so far away. He didn’t even care what she thought, all he could see was happiness and it was all he could give as well.

“I would like to take this opportunity,” Alex said, clearing his throat. “To announce that I, too, prefer the romantic company of my own gender.”

Gwendolyn straight up fainted again, and this time Philip didn’t catch her, Alex did.

Catherine giggled again. “Alex wants a boyfriend.”

“But—I don’t understand—” Amue (or Strongine; Zinnia couldn’t really tell them apart) stuttered.

“Gay. He’s also gay,” Zinnia said.
“And I am very much gay at this fantastic news, my children,” Philip said. “Come, come, let us toast to this.”

Together, they all walked to the table where many glasses of champagne were waiting for a hand to pick them up so they all would have one to drink from.

“To Alex and Olivier,” Philip said, raising his glass. “Who today have given a brand new meaning to the family name.”

“Cheer, cheer!” Zinnia said.

They all drank and Philip hugged his children with the enthusiasm he hadn’t shown in years. Right away, they cheered at Olivier to kiss her girlfriend, and she did, the bubbles of the champagne still clouding whatever sense of privacy she still had somewhere in her.

“I think it went well…” Zinnia murmured right into her lips. Her hands were on Olivier’s waist, the glass of champagne forgotten on the table again, and she did not plan on moving them away from there ever again.

Well? Olivier kissed her again. And again. And the cheering continued as they did. Well? Her mother was lying on the cold floors, unconscious, her father was positively happy at the thought of two of his offspring being very much gay, Catherine was giddy enough to be the first to cheer for them, and Amue and Strongine had toasted with the rest of them. Olivier could not ask for more.

“When’s the wedding?” Alex hooted.

“Shut up, Alex!” Zinnia and Olivier said without even turning to look at him.

They were together, kissing and expressing their love in front of Olivier’s family. They had drunk to their own happiness, to their story, to the fact that now, from this day on, they wouldn’t have to hide from anyone. It would have been a miracle if they’d been able to focus on anything that wasn’t each other.

Irresistible. That was the word to describe Mustang’s attempts at drawing Olivier in. No matter how hard she tried not to get involved and heal her broken bones in peace, the bastard kept coming to her house with the excuse of worrying about her healing and instead talked to her about what he planned to do when a new Führer sat in Central Command—what was left of Central Command, anyway. And Mustang’s insistence was not even related to the very strong possibility of him winning the election. He only ever wanted to piece Amestris back together, he said. But Olivier knew better.

Mustang was young and, despite herself, beloved by public and colleagues alike. He would have no trouble going against his evenly matched rival, General Grumman, an old man wise beyond his years that had allied with Mustang and the Elric brothers as well to put a stop to Father’s plans. Grumman might have a straighter reputation than Mustang did, but Mustang was the hero of the people. Handsome, funny, and his heart, to top it all off, was in the right place. Currently, Olivier believed, in the hands of Lieutenant Hawkeye. She wouldn’t remain a lieutenant much longer. Promotions had been guaranteed for Olivier’s and Mustang’s teams, themselves included, in reward for their service before and after the Promised Day. And Mustang was already acting like a goddamn fucking general.

Sitting in Olivier’s office, he spoke of wars he planned to stop from his new position of power, and she let him—because she didn’t want to ever hear that word again unless it was on her terms, in her
lands, with an army at her back. And that reality was, sadly, ages away from her reach.

“We just won a war,” she told him, as he went on about the south and the west and annexations. “How many more do you intent our men to win this year?”

Mustang just looked at her like she hadn’t understood the purpose of this conversation at all.

“I’m calling for a truce with Aerugo and Creta,” he said, clearly an obvious thing to do for him.

“And will you be allowed to do it if the rest of the generals vote no? And, if they vote in your favor, will it work? Will the enemy accept a truce?”

Mustang groaned impatiently, yet tolerantly at the same time. Sometimes he felt that dealing with Olivier Armstrong was like speaking to both a parent and their child: irritating beyond belief. She kept either poking him blatantly about this and that and “is that beard permanent, Mustang?” or criticizing every single idea he had for the future he hoped to build.

“General,” he said, “if I knew what is going to work, I wouldn’t be consulting you about it.”

“Oh, you’re consulting me?” Olivier said, ever the child, and sat back on her chair, observing him and musing her chin. “Perhaps you really have grown up, Mustang.”

“It’s the two conflicts I can be sure stemmed solely from Father’s plan, under Bradley’s command,” he said and he didn’t have to say any more.

Drachma. The last war, the war up north, the northern country that thirsted after conquests. Olivier’s Achilles’s heel.

“A truce with them is the most realistic thing that can be hoped for, given the circumstances,” Mustang continued.

And he was right on that front, at least. Both Creta and Aerugo had ceased their fire when the news of Central having stood at the very brink of national disaster had reached them, in respect for the fallen soldiers and those at their front lines that would choose to travel to Central to make sure their loved ones were okay. War was depicted—and unarguably was—as the peak of cruelty for the human being. Members of the same species shot at one another hoping to kill or at least maim seriously. Countries were pillaged, thousands of people called to arms, to fight something that never ended. Because war was only ever as old as human nature. But war was also one of the few instances of life where that human nature showed itself, not only at its cruelest, but at its most understanding. It was at war when enemies showed mercy, not under the reign of peace.

“I’m sure their governments will understand if we share the truth with them.”

He watched her for a few seconds, expectant.

“Are you also consulting me about that?” she said. “The public can’t know for obvious reasons, but if you want to tell enemies of the state that this was a civil war… good luck with it.”

“Obviously, there would be a little more secrecy to it.”

Finally, Olivier asked a question. Her question.

“And what about Drachma?”

Mustang let out his air for a long amount of time.
“I’ve been thinking about it,” he said. “Originally, I planned to draft up a truce as well, call it a day. But … Drachma has been trying to penetrate our borders since before Bradley was Führer. And it’s the only nation we’re at war with that hasn’t stopped their fighting and looting with the news of the Promised Day’s aftermath.”

“I assume that means there will be no truce.”

“I doubt they would accept one. They only want one thing: our land. And they won’t stop until they take it,” Mustang said. “So it’s imperative someone does stop them.”

Olivier’s throat almost closed up. She made no sound and merely tried to sit still, listening to her own heartbeat speed up. Stopping Drachma was what she had been promoted to Major General for. It was the only thing she had looked forward to when days were dull and food inedible. Nothing else was her destiny as fighting that war. That was the only war she would allow for many years, the war she carried in her bones and bloodstream, the war that would end future wars with Briggs emerging from it victorious.

“I always had the feeling they were in for more than just the Homunculi’s plan,” Mustang said slowly. Then, his eyes met hers. Their presence hovered between the two of them, right over the desk. “The Northern Wall stopped them once. Think you can do it again?”

At first, it went right over Olivier’s head like a bad joke. When it sank in, she almost choked at the realization. She had expected, as it was natural, that with her promotion would come responsibilities she could only take care of here in Central, at least for the first few months—even years—until the city was as it had used to be. She had learned to accept that she wouldn’t see Briggs for a very, very long time, and that she would eventually just have to send her men back north to fend Drachma off without her.

“You’re not keeping me here, huh?”

“I don’t think this is the place for an Ice Queen. Too hot,” he joked, then got serious. “The north has always been safe thanks to you, I trust it will continue to be this way. How many men have you lost?”

Too many. But how many did she need, really, to fire off cannons? How many could she keep safe like that?

“Not enough to stop us from kicking Drachma back into radio silence, Mustang. Or should I call you Führer now?”

“I’ll make sure some men are sent north anyway. And …” He looked at her for a moment. “We’ll see if the elections become me. You’ll get your chance to cast a vote, although I probably shouldn’t get my hopes up, eh?”

“Better you than Grumman…” she muttered to herself.

He heard anyway, of course. And his chuckle was probably loud enough to disrupt her parents in the living room.

“Did you hit your head in the fight, Armstrong?”

“Goodbye, Mustang!” she said, dismissing him.
The voting was held in the National Library in light of the fact that the Central Command center was still under reconstruction. In the end, only Mustang and Grumman had put themselves forward as candidates for the election. And, even if Olivier had spent many of the previous years making sure Mustang knew how little she liked him, he had been the smart choice. The country needed new vision after Bradley’s poor decision-making and that was one of the things Mustang would be able to provide. That, and his unerring faith in optimism. He had been witness to the fall of the government, deaths that he hadn’t been able to put a stop to, and the true reality of the cruel world they lived in. And yet Mustang still believed in the good of human beings. He still believed he could do better.

After all, Mustang was all pretend and no substance to the world. He presented as ambitious and shallow most of the time, earning the affection of everyone around him because that was what made a man charismatic. But Olivier had seen the real man beneath all that, and that was who she voted for.

She was one of the first to exit the room. She had no interest in staying around until they were done counting votes. These days, her life was in her bedroom with Zinnia, in the terrace with her brother, and drinking expensive whiskey with her father in silence. Olivier required nothing else for the present moment. Just a taste of home, the old home she had abandoned time ago, and the home up north she still dreamed of from time to time.

But today the sun shone, gaining traction with the passing of days. March had come to an end and the warmth of the upcoming summer threatened to settle already in Central City. This was nothing like that home in the back of her head, beneath her sternum.

Zinnia waited for her outside, dressed in one of those dresses Olivier hadn’t seen her in since last spring. It hit her like a lightning striking against her heart. If she didn’t know that face as well as she knew her own reflection, she would have thought she was seeing a ghost of last year.

Beside Zinnia there was a suitcase.

“Going anywhere, flower girl?”

“Home,” Zinnia said, quickly leaning forward to steal a kiss from Olivier’s lips. They said hello like this, now that neither feared the repercussions it could have on Olivier’s career. “I need to make sure they’re all okay. And the phones still don’t work outside of the city.” It had been over a week since the Promised Day and communications remained affected. After the fight, suddenly the power supply had gone mute and neither radios nor phones worked. “They might not even be there yet, but I have to try anyway. It’s been long enough.”

The province had been declared safe again via letters to other provinces. And, as Zinnia had said, enough days had gone by for her parents to have received the news and known they could come back. She hoped that they had. No matter what enmities she still had with her mother or what strange reluctance she had to being with them again, Zinnia knew it was the right thing to do. She had to make sure they were alright, help them settle down once again in their house, and spend a little time with them.

She had sort of decided it all of a sudden. Days were long and boring in Central without the usual activity. There wasn’t anywhere new to go, and staying in morning after morning was beginning to feel a bit dull. She needed to run, feel the wind in her face, see the buildings being repaired, and remind herself that it was over, that she could breathe now.

It did constrict her lungs a little, though, thinking about how Olivier would take this. They had been more or less always together since she had been discharged from the hospital. Sometimes it was impossible to know who needed the other more. But Zinnia also needed this, she needed a different
perspective to heal.

“Can I come?” Olivier said.

Zinnia had not been expecting that. She tried not to stammer too much.

“Oh. Yeah, sure. Why not?” Her mind revolved at a million miles per second. Olivier wanted to go with her, which Zinnia had not seen coming, and not only that, she had asked for permission like it was the most natural thing to do. But Olivier was used to very different standards than those she would find in Zinnia’s hometown. There were no mansions there, just one-story tiny houses and fields for the cattle to roam. It was a slightly bigger Iver without snow. And it would not be a destination for just a few hours. “But… I mean, my parents’ house is … nowhere near as big as yours.”

Olivier looked at her and tried to understand why that would be important.

“I don’t care. I’m going to sleep in the same bed as you anyway, doesn’t matter how big the place is.”

Size rarely mattered.

“Well, not very big.”

“Zinnia. Shut up.”

“It’s just that, well, you’re rich and—”

“Are you afraid you’re going to embarrass me?”

“Disappoint you is more like it. Unless my family has changed much, it’s like extrapolating all the dynamics in your house to a much smaller place. It’s suffocating sometimes. I’m used to it, so it’s not that bad, but—”

“Then I’ll just kiss you to let you breathe my air,” Olivier said, and it was the way she said it, completely meaning it, that made Zinnia’s heart flutter like she was a fourteen-year-old with a gigantic crush. She wasn’t sure that feeling had ever really gone away in the past year. A whole year, looking at Olivier and ignoring the immensity of her emotions for the sake of appearance, and there went Olivier, the emotionally repressed one in this relationship, and left her breathless with a comment that was meant to expand the air in her lungs.

They held hands in the car and Zinnia realized, not for the first time since the Promised Day, that they were really going to spend the rest of their lives like this.

Airedale was a town built in stone, for the most part. A collection of houses that resembled the stoic facade of Ianthe’s old house in Central and whose walls were always touching the next building’s. It was a town that never ended, that only had as open space the dirt paths that acted as streets and led to the wooden train station, the exception to the stone rule. A circle of a dwelling, small enough that few people knew about it but big enough to be included in the maps because of its proximity to Central, Airedale showed its solitary face these days.

From inside the car, Zinnia looked around, her heart in her sleeve. She hoped to see someone she knew and confirm that the exile she had sent the whole town on was over.
“Normally, there’s people all around,” she said, in spite of the fact that Olivier hadn’t made any comment at all. Right now, Zinnia regretted having let her come. Olivier being witness to what one day had been her only home had left her feeling indecisive, once more, about how she viewed that part of her old life. And, most importantly, it made her hyper aware of everything that could go wrong in this visit, starting with having driven here for nothing because the town was empty.

Zinnia gave directions to the driver to slither through the tiny dirt paths that separated the houses. When they drove past her family’s butchery, she almost squealed at finding its door open. Her family had to have returned, her mother would have never allowed for anyone else to take care of it.

She didn’t want to tell Olivier until they were parked in front of her house. There was something unspoken between them, an awareness of what meeting one’s parents entailed and that Zinnia had met the Armstrongs already but Olivier had no idea, other than what Zinnia had told her, about what the Erwins were like. Even worse, the Erwins knew nothing about what hid between an act as simple as holding hands in a car.

“This is it,” Zinnia announced.

She took her time getting out of the car and freeing her suitcase from the trunk. For years, she had lived here. For years, in her never-ending race to get away, she had come back. And it felt like today was the first time she was seeing how square the house was. It barely had a proper roof to speak of, it sprouted the slightest inclination for the rain to slip right down. The walls were thick silver stone and the door was not even a proper door when spring bloomed, just a curtain of beads. A house of butchers, a house of peasants. And Zinnia had brought with her an aristocrat whose childhood clothes cost more than this entire building between higher houses.

As Olivier gave instructions to the driver, Zinnia tried to control her breathing, to look at the house and not hope that it was better. She had never needed that to be better. Of all things in her life, this house was the one thing she had never worried about. Sturdy enough, warm enough, wide enough. It had sufficed to keep her parents and herself afloat for years. They had never dealt with floods or fires. But would Olivier view it in the same way? Would she even accept sleeping in there, on a bed made of straw that wasn’t big enough for two?

And that would not even be the worst part.

Two people awaited behind those beads. Two people she had said goodbye to in the train station, knowing she might never see them again. And yet here she was.

In front of a home that wasn’t her home. She longed for Briggs, and that should have been obvious enough for her.

“I told him not to bother coming back,” Olivier said behind her. Her boots crushed the grains of sand beneath them as she walked up to Zinnia. “We can take the train.”

“Or walk back, if it gets bad enough.”

Olivier just patted her in the back, clearly not caught up at all.

“You fought a war,” she said instead. “This is nothing.”

On the contrary, this is everything, Zinnia told herself.

Of course, Olivier was the first one to walk in, like she already knew the place. That woman didn’t know hesitation. With her it was either ‘do’ or ‘don’t’, nothing about spending a few nights thinking about ‘maybe’ when the middle ground was most needed.
When Zinnia followed her, she did it deafened by her own heartbeat. She almost prayed for no one to be in.

As always, the little windows in the stone walls allowed for very little light. Her parents liked living in almost medieval levels of darkness so much they had hung curtains to muffle whatever little light could filter through from the streets. Luckily, Zinnia remembered well the layout of the house, she would have no trouble with it.

She should have counted on Olivier having stopped abruptly in the middle of the living room, unable to see in the dimness. Zinnia crashed into her as physically as she once, long ago, had done emotionally.

“It’s dark,” Olivier used an excuse.

“Maybe I should be the one leading?” Zinnia grumbled, and then added, mostly to herself: “If you weren’t always so fucking intent on being the first to do everything, these things wouldn’t happen…”

But she didn’t mean the tone she had used. She was just stressed, that was all. Coming alone would have been unexciting and mostly depressing, but at least she would have gotten it all done quickly. Help around, have a few lunches with her parents, make sure they had everything they needed, and return to Central and the Armstrong mansion where the tension wasn’t hers to deal with. Yet Zinnia hadn’t known how to say no to Olivier, who had asked to come with all the respect and curiosity in the world. And she should have. Because now she was mad for no reason, right when something wicked awaited her in the depths of the house.

Like a bad host trying to be good, Zinnia pulled the curtains back so Olivier would see. The living room had been clearly affected by an indoor hurricane. Things piled up in strange orders in every flat surface, even the couches, and the floor was covered in open suitcase in which the clothes floated in wrinkles.

“Either someone tried to rob this place or—” Olivier began to say, her voice the harmonics of a pair of footsteps that approached the living room fast-paced.

“I knew it! I knew it was you!”

Zinnia instantly smiled at the sight of her father, ecstatic as if he had just won the lottery. He hobbled towards her and pulled her into a hug.

“We were so worried, Zinnia. So very worried. All those rumors, that blackout—are you okay?” he quickly muttered to her shoulder.

She melted into his arms like a little girl that has just woken up from a nightmare. If she could have made a home out of people when she was little, her father would have been her first option.

“In one piece, dad,” Zinnia said. “How are you? How’s mum?”

Finally, he moved away a little, although he couldn’t stop himself from holding her hands.

“We’re fine. We’re all fine. Returned yesterday as soon as West Command shared the news that it was finally safe.”

She grinned.

“Explains the mess.”
“You know your mother,” the old man said, shrugging.

It was then that his eyes stopped drinking Zinnia in like he hadn’t seen her in decades and paused to quietly observe the still silhouette of Olivier, who slowly had backed away to give father and daughter some privacy.

“So,” he said to Zinnia, a hint of a grandiose smirk coming up. “Is this the woman you wrote to me about? The mysterious general you mentioned last time?”

Zinnia’s cheeks began to burn. There was no spark first, just the fire, spreading through her cheekbones at the speed of light. Once, she had written about Olivier—in very vague terms, might she add—once, a lifetime ago. When Olivier had been a ghost to her, a ghost of a future she dreamed of and wrote about but never dared to reach out and touch.

“Yes,” she said in low voice. “But there’s no need to bring that up now.”

She heard Olivier snort behind her and swore to all the gods she didn’t believe in that she would make her pay for laughing.

It took her father two seconds to step closer to Olivier and offer her a hand to shake.

“Hi, I’m Zinnia’s father,” he said. “And my daughter likes you very much.”

Zinnia wanted to die. It didn’t matter to her that Olivier was already updated about that ‘liking’ situation. She could only think about the embarrassment that would have gone through her if Olivier hadn’t been aware of her feelings and Zinnia had just brought her home for something business-related. She would have probably died, gotten swallowed by the wooden planks on the floor.

Olivier, thankfully oblivious to the conflicts inside her girlfriend, just smiled. Because it was obvious where Zinnia got her silliness from.

“Oh, I know,” she said, still grinning.

“Do you also like her very much back?” Zinnia’s father asked in all seriousness. This resembled too much a proposal and the moment after where one of the spouses-to-be asks the soon-to-be spouse’s parents for their hand. Judging by Zinnia’s father’s grin, his answer would have been ‘yes’. Yes, you can marry my child. Those were big, big words. Zinnia wished for the floor planks to swallow her now.

“She knows I do,” Olivier answered just as solemnly.

“She does,” Zinnia said, her voice barely a thin thread.

Olivier shook her father’s hand in the same way she did when she was meeting a superior.

“Where’s mum?” Zinnia said, incapable of putting up with whatever this was for much longer.

Mrs. Erwin, the hurricane that had come to the household. A woman that whenever she walked in a room had the energy of someone holding a butcher knife—and in her case it would never be too fat-fetched for her to actually have one in her hands.

“Honey, our daughter is back!” Zinnia’s father said loudly. “And she has a little surprise for us.”

“Dad, seriously, you don’t have to hype it up so much…”

“No,” Olivier said. “Let him. It took effort to get here. Might as well make a show out of it.”
Zinnia elbowed her as discreetly as she was able to.

“You’re only saying this because they’re not your parents,” she whispered.

Olivier leaned in to whisper back: “I’ll make it up to you later.”

“Oh, you’d better…”

The hurricane’s footsteps were as loud as the winds that whirled around her. Mrs. Erwin was a small woman, neither fat nor thin, simply taking as much space in the world as the world had deemed fit. She had strong arms to chop meat and sturdy legs that once had roamed with the cattle. And her entrance into a room was always stuff of legends.

The bun her hair had been shaped in tightened her facial expression, and when she walked into the thin sunbeams coming into the house Zinnia was not able to tell which expression she was trying to make.

“Who’s this?” she asked, meaning Olivier.

“Major General Armstrong,” Zinnia said, puffing up her chest. She told herself she would just do it a little, enough to feel better, but something had engorged within her right that second and she had taken her pride out to stroll in the real world. “Soon to be Lieutenant General.”

Zinnia’s mother made a face that perfectly conveyed the idea of ‘and I am supposed to be impressed?’, although Zinnia knew that even her mother, living the most rural life, had heard of Olivier.

“What did you do to bring the authority here?” she said, exasperated. “And how much do we have to pay?

In spite of how much she hated having to have this conversation with someone who still saw her as a kid with mud on her knees, Zinnia smiled.

“Steal my heart,” Olivier replied resolutely, with the old firmness in her voice that she used to ease off her soldier’s wishful aspirations. “Something worthy of praise, I am told.”

Both Zinnia and her father chuckled softly at that.

“You must be the woman who failed to raise her,” Olivier continued. “I would ask you the same question you have asked your daughter, but I am afraid we all knew what you did.” To wrap it all beautifully, Olivier smiled, too. And it wasn’t just any normal smile. It was one of those heart-felt ones she reserved for special occasions, and feigned as Zinnia knew it was, she deeply appreciated the effort. The comeback at her mother that the woman would never forget and the attempt at cordiality, which really was nothing but a veiled threat and a challenge. And no one, absolutely no one, could win a stubbornness challenge if Olivier Armstrong was the main competitor.

It didn’t end there, of course. Zinnia and Olivier helped the Erwins with the move, having already dropped their things in Zinnia’s room and shared a brief but intense moment that would best be summarized in the world ‘later’. Zinnia’s father did not stop asking questions for hours; about the war, because who else would get a complete account of what had happened—or what the public needed to think had happened—than a general herself; about the future of Amestris, which was no longer as uncertain as it once had been, since the election results should be made public soon—not that Olivier planned on paying attention now that she was here; and, finally, about them.

“How did you meet? No, wait, don’t tell me. Tell me where first. Places are important,” he would
And Zinnia and Olivier would stop doing whatever they were doing at the moment—putting dishes and glasses where they belonged, folding clothes that smelled like naphthalene, making beds—and would stare into each other’s eyes as if their love story was written in the creases of their irises.

“How did you know this general of yours was the one? How did she know you were? I have so many questions!” He did, and each one he asked was like a log thrown into a child fire, a chance to burn brighter, stronger. “Who kissed who? Are you already at the bed-sharing state? Do you call each other anything?”

Most of the times, Zinnia blushed. She, the storyteller, couldn’t tell this story because it was personal, because it belonged to two souls and nobody else’s. So Olivier, the ice queen, the impenetrable northern wall of Briggs, told it in her place.

*I didn’t just know she was the one, she slowly crept into my heart, built a home of paper and ink there and, once I noticed it, it was already too hard to bring myself to set fire to it. She set fire to me, instead. I melted, the wall of ice within me wept. I kissed her and she thawed the remaining ice. She, the companion in my life and in my bed, the flower girl that stole more than just my heart under the Iver sun.*

Of course, she didn’t dare tell it like that, but that was how Zinnia heard it.

During lunch, Olivier witnessed in her own flesh what it was like to be the Erwins’ only daughter. Zinnia might as well have had her wrists chained to two different horses, each galloping away in a different direction, tearing her joints off a little more with every step.

Where Zinnia’s father was giddy and curious, loving not only to his daughter but to the woman that sat beside her, his wife just stared. She had the eyes of a hawk, saw everything there was to see and analyzed it until she knew what to do with it. And she did not like one bit what she was seeing now.

When she spoke, she did so bitingly. Nothing was right, all because her daughter had run away from home at twenty-four. That mother hadn’t lost a daughter, but she’d lost the loyalty she’d thought any daughters of hers owed her and her husband. And she would forever gnarl at the daughter that had, indeed, come back. Zinnia might have run, but she never meant to run forever.

Olivier faced Zinnia’s mother the way she wasn’t able to face her own mum. It was easy, really, to deal with the same shit that had turned her childhood into a long list of failed expectations if it wasn’t her own tormentor in front of her. She could feel Zinnia’s jaw clenching and unclenching whenever Olivier and the mother quarreled, ever so politely and calmly. But she just couldn’t help it. All mothers should love their daughters, or at least know how to pretend to.

Aside from that, Olivier felt at ease. The food might not have been top-notch, the chairs a little bit too rigid for her taste, and the room small for four people to be eating in, but she wouldn’t have changed a thing if that meant she’d have who was as good as her father-in-law acting like a father to Zinnia and Olivier both.

For the first time in forever, despite the skeleton in the Erwins’ closet, Olivier felt the warmth of a family. They sat together to eat, they all shared any and all chores, and they had real ties, built over time and closeness. One needed to be on speaking terms with somebody to have any relationship with them at all.

After lunch, Zinnia excused herself to go wash the dishes, and Olivier followed her, knowing that if she stayed with Mrs. Erwin much longer she might stop being polite.
“Need any help?” she asked, left shoulder against the door frame.

Zinnia had her forearms lowered in a bowl, hands covered in slippery soap. When she grinned at Olivier, it looked genuine.

“Nah, thanks, I got it.”

Olivier didn’t take that as a cue to leave, instead she came closer and put her arms around Zinnia’s waist, buried her nose in her hair. Time seemed to freeze for a moment, and the water drops slipping away from Zinnia’s elbow ceased to fall.

“Thank you, you know…” Zinnia muttered. Her parents were in the living room still and she didn’t want them to hear. “You didn’t have to. I didn’t do that with your mum.”

“My mum is a terrifying force of nature. Up until very recently, I was scared of her too,” Olivier said, pulling her closer. It didn’t hurt to admit it, even when she’d thought it might. Gwendolyn would always make Olivier feel like she was twelve.

“I’m not scared of my mum,” Zinnia said. “I’m just done with her.”

“Still,” Olivier muttered. “Someone should teach her that’s no way to treat you.”

“And do you think you will manage to instill that lesson in her, general?”

“If you call me general like that,” Olivier breathed out, “I will manage it all.”

Not much later, the house ceased to be as quiet—a post-lunch calmness that could never last too long, even if it succeeded in lasting until mid-afternoon tea. This time it wasn’t the entrance of a hurricane, but the not fully pleasant scent of pollen in big quantities.

“I was just at the butchery, Mrs. Erwin,” came a voice that brought Zinnia back to those days in her youth that she’d once thought would forever define her, when they’d done little more than settle the foundations for who she would soon become. “The neighbors are slowly coming back. A few passed by to see if you were in…”

Anthony, a poppy flower in all his brashness, was in the house. Zinnia had had to leave his life, hoping that would eventually mean he would leave hers, but she’d long ago stopped hoping. He was still here, after decades and a war. He was the Erwins’ subrogate son-in-law.

But now the Erwins did have a daughter-in-law, or the closest thing to that.

“Thank you for lending a hand,” Zinnia’s mother told Anthony, whose face was a realistic impersonation of shock. “I would have gone myself, but there was so much to do.”

“The … the place looks nice,” he was able to stutter.

Zinnia tried to pity him, at least a little. This was his life now, coming into this house to help in her name, even though she never asked him to. It couldn’t have been easy to walk into it and see it had been taken over by someone else, someone that everyone found intimidating, someone that wouldn’t go away. Plus, the memories in the shape of a twenty-nine-year-old woman in one of her spring dresses.

“This just keeps happening and I never know what to say,” Anthony said. “So… hello again, Zinnia.”
“‘Hello’ works, yeah,” she replied. “‘Hello’ is the most normal thing you’ve said to me.”

“I like normal.” He shrugged.

“Wish you would have liked it before, too.”

A tense silence reigned for a few seconds.

“Do you want me to introduce you, Anthony?”

Anthony, clearly, did not want to be there in that moment, but there was no subtle way of leaving without being seen. So he nodded, his throat dry, and took a seat in the crowded living room, next to Mrs. Erwin.

It was awkward, like having sex for the first time, but Zinnia did it gladly.

“This is my girlfriend,” she said. And she would keep on saying it, so Anthony would memorize it. So Anthony would finally get it into his thick skull that the past was in the past and that Zinnia had moved on in many more ways than he knew.

Of course, Anthony being Anthony, and despite his nervousness, he managed to come off as he was. Brutally honest, still resentful over a years-old breakup that no longer smelled like anything, and hopeful that one day Zinnia would still realize he was the best man on earth and take him back. It was his defining trait, that stupid hope that never went away and that had gotten him into the heart of her childhood home.

Stories and anecdotes resonated inside the Erwins’ home all afternoon and evening long. Olivier merely laughed and listened until the conversation had spun in the direction of her and Zinnia. She learned more about the Erwins’ than she had hoped to learn about their daughter. Anthony, she thought, should count as an Erwin, too. By the way he looked at Zinnia and her parents, it was clear to Olivier that he not only wanted to be part of the family but that he had nibbled at the distance between them until he’d made it. She noticed how he allied with Mrs. Erwin as many times as he could, although he was equally gentle to Zinnia’s father. But Mr Erwin acted coldly towards him, as if he’d suddenly realized how much of this was Anthony’s fantasies. To Olivier, though, Mr Erwin was nothing but welcoming. His eyes said: You, my daughter, are part of my family in ways this disaster of a human being never can be. And it was enough for her.

They drank tea and made Zinnia blush, had Olivier chuckling loudly despite only having consumed an a hot drink, and managed to displace Anthony, which only meant he would try even harder to fit in. It was a beautiful rendition of the dynamics of that house, honest and truthful. And real. Olivier liked the substance that hid beneath every word that was spoken and every meaningful glance. Whether they liked each other or not, they were a family. And Zinnia would always have a bed in their house, a place in their heart, and their respect.

When late at night around dinner they told the story of the first time Zinnia had brought Dew home, Olivier had to make herculean efforts not to cry at the sheer acceptance Zinnia had received when they’d realized she was not straight.

“It was clear that our little Zin loved that girl,” Mr Erwin said, smiling softly. “One only had to pay a minimum of attention to notice. She had eyes just for Dew. You could say ‘good morning’ to her and Zinnia would hear nothing if Dew was around.” He giggled. “I still wonder how it took you that long to find out, kid.”

Zinnia groaned. “I know I’m the embodiment of the stereotype, but I was confused, okay? Attraction
is hard to navigate.”

“I know harder things…” Anthony muttered.

Olivier took her chance to kick him in the shin. He did not say another word.

“I saw her before you guys all left,” Zinnia said. “She still looks like a marble sculpture of a goddess. And … yeah, I probably still look at her like I used to.”

“She’s married,” Mrs Erwin said, abruptly. “To a man.”

“Yeah,” Zinnia said, defiant. “And she’s really happy.”

And then Mr Erwin said: “But you are really happy, too, Zinnia.” His smile returned, like the sun when the clouds finally part. “One only has to pay a … minimum of attention. You’ve been looking at General Armstrong all day long and there’s something there that Dew never gave you.”

“Please just call me Olivier,” Olivier said.

“And what’s that something?” Zinnia asked in a mutter.

The sun in her dad’s smile shone at its brightest and gentlest, a sunset against moving waves.

“Reciprocity.”

Eventually, Anthony went home to his own family, promising to return, because he was allergic to leaving, and it was just the four of them. Mrs Erwin retired early to bed, alleging that she wanted to get up at dawn to go to the butchery. But Mr Erwin stayed up a little longer, his gift with the spoken word as evident as his daughter’s with the written one.

“So, child,” he said to Zinnia. “I assume you’re not back here to stay forever. What plans do you have?”

Olivier’s heart gave a little lurch inside her chest that she hoped Zinnia hadn’t noticed.

“For now, I’m living with Olivier’s family in Central. Until things get back to normal, I guess that’s where we’ll be, right?” She squeezed Olivier’s hand.

“You can come visit, then!”

Zinnia laughed, uncomfortable.

“I’m visiting now, dad.”

“And … no wedding plans?”

“If it fits into mum’s fantasy of what my life should be,” Zinnia was quick to add, “I won’t do it.”

“Besides, what need is there?” Olivier said. “Many couples these days aren’t getting married.”

“I know, I know. It’s just … well, celebrations are beautiful. And there is plenty to celebrate of late.”

He tipped Zinnia’s chin. It was clear how much he wanted to celebrate his daughter.

“In any case…” he said, slowly getting up from the chair. “I think I’m heading to bed. You kids have a good night.”
For a second, Zinnia expected him to say something playful, telling her to be careful like he had when Anthony had been a thing, but he only smiled and left. His little girl was all grown up now, she knew there were things it was better to enter without a care in the world.

Olivier and Zinnia stayed, sitting around the table and muttering idly, until the candle at its center burned out. In the dark, Olivier had to put a hand around Zinnia to not get lost. Despite how small the house was, she only knew where the kitchen and living room were, and she didn’t want to accidentally walk into the Erwins’ bedroom.

“It’s really small…” Zinnia whispered, almost there. She guided herself with her hands on the wall, tracing the route to her room. Even bare as it was, it was still hers.

“I know. I’ve seen it. I like it.”

“You’ll like it less when you have to sleep in it.”

“Just take me there and let me be the judge of that.”

Zinnia panicked for a second.

“You’re being nice. This isn’t fair. What if I want you to yell at me?”

“Not with your parents in the house.”

Zinnia scoffed. “Yeah, right, so you don’t want them to see the general in her element, huh?”

“It’s hardly a good time to give orders.”

Finally, Zinnia’s feet stopped moving and her hand found Olivier’s. Olivier took a deep breath and found Zinnia’s ears. Even in the dark, she knew Zinnia’s body as well as she did the constellations in the sky.

“Just take me into your room, please,” she whispered.

And Zinnia nodded, throat dry, and stepped inside, Olivier following her.

“There’s nothing on the floor, so you don’t have to be scared of running into anything,” she muttered as she let go of Olivier’s hand and dived alone into the darkness, blindly looking for something to get a candle burning and have some light.

She was older now, experienced, but the feeling of having her crush—her girlfriend, her almost wife—in her bedroom, even if it was a bedroom she’d only used twice this year, still was stronger than her. This had been hers, far more so than the room they’d shared at Briggs. The old Zinnia still danced among the dust particles in the mornings when the sun hit the room, and Olivier had only known the modern Zinnia, taller and stronger, her tongue faster and her words sharper. Here, many truths dwelled, waiting to be found.

Once there was light, Zinnia opened the suitcase that she’d left earlier on the bed and started putting things in her chest of drawers. Dresses, tights, pants, jackets, shoes. Finally, she took off her dress slowly, baring her torso to the naked orange light of the candle and the light-headed eyes of Olivier, and put on something more comfortable to sleep in.

“Are you just going to stand there?” Zinnia asked once she was fully clothed again. “Didn’t you bring any sleepwear?”
“I can just sleep in my undershirt,” Olivier said.

“It gets cold at night.”

“You’ll keep me warm,” Olivier said with a tired smile. “You always do.”

Accepting a silent invitation, Zinnia helped Olivier out of that infernal uniform that they both had learned to love, folded it and left it on the chest of drawers for tomorrow. Seeing Olivier in this little clothing never failed to make her want to sigh for ten minutes. It was a landscape reserved for Olivier herself. Her body was the soft and round hills of her shoulders, the mountain summits of her nipples and the slope of her stomach, made of prairies. Olivier’s arms had buildings instead of biceps, and her face was poetry that hasn’t been written yet but will very soon be. Her blue eyes whispered ethereally just how many promises hid beneath the irises and her lips were the forbidden apple, the honey you have to get past a beehive to taste. Even right now, with her chest and belly covered, Olivier was more than just a sculpture of a goddess, she was divinity itself. Nature and chaos, the destruction of a world to rebuild a better one, a song whispered instead of sung. Olivier was Zinnia’s words as much as she was her world.

“Maybe we should get into bed,” Zinnia muttered a while after, still sitting on the covers, not talking, not looking at each other, but sharing the same air and space. Intimacy has many names, some of which have never been spoken out loud before. “It’ll be warmer in there. And it’s late,” she remembered to add, like the good girl she’d tried to be when she’d still lived here.

Olivier hadn’t known that girl, yet something inside her was telling her that she might very soon, if she got inside those covers, on that bed that was hardly big enough for one.

“I look like a goddamn grandmother,” Zinnia complained, finally pushing the duvet aside to get in. “And meanwhile you’re dressed like you’re about to push someone against a wall.”

“In a scary way or a sexy way?”

Now tucked between duvet and the wall, Zinnia grumbled:

“I’m not telling you that…”

But she had an answer ready even if she didn’t want to admit it. Anyone with seeing eyes would have known what to answer, to be perfectly honest. Olivier’s beauty wasn’t just a subjective thing, it transcended boundaries. Even those that weren’t attracted to her knew that she possessed something that made her truthfully beautiful. Beautiful and terrifying, both. Perhaps Zinnia had no answer for her question, after all.

The bed groaned and squealed until Olivier was comfortably lying on her side, her left arm pressed against Zinnia’s stomach. Her butt was inches away from falling off the mattress, but she didn’t care. She’d slept in worse places.

Tense in this position, Zinnia tried to control her breathing. She was not fifteen anymore, she was a grown woman who had seen life and death and knew truths other people don’t dream of encountering. Lying in her bed, in her bedroom, with her parents trying to sleep in the next room, shouldn’t have been a daunting task. Yet by the way she was breathing and the pounding of her heart anyone could have said it was.

“Is this where you brought all those boys and girls?” Olivier asked after a minute or two of silence.

Zinnia turned to face her. “Excuse me?”
“To fuck,” Olivier elaborated.

“First off: all those boys and girls? Who do you think I am? I was barely lucky enough to find one of either gender.”

“Two of one,” Olivier corrected.

“Whatever,” Zinnia said. “And second: I would never fuck this close to my parents.”

She said it knowing it was a lie. She would fuck Olivier right now—cursed be the hand on her waist and the fingers that kept tracing circles on Zinnia’s abdomen underneath her clothes—with her parents in the house. She had fucked Anthony in this room, years ago, a lifetime ago. And only because she would have preferred her parents to catch them than his.

“Sometimes you’re such a teenager, flower girl,” Olivier muttered. “I’m not your mother. You don’t have to pretend in front of me.”

“You come into my house,” Zinnia said, only ever pretending to be offended, “and you accuse me of sleeping around in my own bedroom. How condescending of you.”

Slowly, Olivier’s hand drifted upwards, closer and closer to her chest, and Zinnia almost smashed her head against the wall trying to run away from it.

“You come into my house,” Zinnia said, breathier than before, “and you tempt me into sleeping around. How … cruel.”

Cruel, as her fingers on her, never touching anything sensitive enough and always tracing circles that grew smaller and smaller as Zinnia’s stomach dropped farther than gravity should allow.

‘Later’, they had promised to one another hours ago. Later and better. But this bed was small and there were too many feelings, old and new, standing in the way.

“What is it like?” Olivier asked in low voice, hand currently against Zinnia’s sternum. Warm and hard, a shield and a pillow at the same time. A home for flightless birds with clipped wings. “With a penis thrown in the mix.”

Zinnia giggled so loudly she thought her parents had heard.

“Who’s the teenager now?”

“I’ve had my fair of sleeping around but never been lucky enough to be with a girl who had one,” Olivier said. “For now.”

Zinnia chuckled now.

“Oh-ho, so I’m not gonna be your last, huh?”

“Will you just answer the question? I’d rather we talked about intercourse than about the future.” But that was only because Zinnia would be Olivier’s last. Olivier’s only. And she would never be able to say it out loud.

In the end, Zinnia stopped laughing to herself and gave a more or less coherent answer:

“It’s not that much different than when you use fingers,” she said. “Just … I don’t know, fuller? Rounder? It’s been a long time, I’m not qualified to explain this.” She sighed and then took a deep breath. “Why the sudden interest?”
“Anthony,” Olivier only said.

Zinnia could not bite down the laugh that came out of her like an orgasm.

“He is exactly why I’m not qualified. It’s been…” She quickly calculated it. “Thirteen years, almost fourteen. I haven’t had a dick in me in fourteen years, and although I was much appreciative of it at the time, I can imagine he wasn’t at his best just like I wasn’t at my best.”

“Pity,” Olivier said. “I’ll just have to ask him.”

This time, she giggled with Zinnia, too.

“He already resents you,” Zinnia said. “You don’t have to make it worse.”

But Olivier wanted to make it worse, so he would take the hint from someone taller and stronger than him if he wouldn’t take it from Zinnia.

“And Dew?” Olivier asked, softly. Her hand finally resting again on Zinnia’s side, pulling her closer even though ‘closer’ was just a technicality on such a small bed.

Zinnia exhaled.

“The first time I took her here I didn’t know I liked her,” she said. “But you heard my dad, I should’ve known.” She exhaled again and this time her breath took longer to leave her lungs. “We never had sex. We never had anything. We just sat, here or at her place, or in some stairs. And we talked about anything you can think of. She talked more than me and … often I would just catch myself looking at her, at the signs of passion in her words. I loved her and I didn’t know until she found herself a boyfriend.” Zinnia chuckled sadly now. “You know this … oppression in your chest, the oppression of a truth you can’t circle around and beat? In my case it was love.”

For a few seconds, Zinnia was quiet, licking her lips so the wetness getting to them wouldn’t just be stray tears.

“She used to … she used to touch me. Nothing out of the ordinary, just … little strokes up and down my naked back in the summer. Or resting her head upon my shoulder for longer than I was used to. Sometimes we even held hands,” Zinnia kept saying, sniffling her tears and snot back in. “I should’ve known, I know. That it wasn’t just me, that she felt something too. But when I did know, it was already too late.”

Nobody said anything in a few minutes. Zinnia didn’t know if she should say what she wanted to and Olivier doubted anything she might come up with would do anything to make Zinnia feel better about a past she was already over.

“And you… God damn it all, you. I thought you hated me. You kept marking your town as territory of General Armstrong, marking me down as just another annoying rock in the way. And the more I looked at you the more I wanted to know why, and if who you were beneath that was anything like who you pretended to be,” Zinnia muttered. “I don’t remember when I first realized I loved you, but I know now that was the reason I needed to get away from you. Your whole fort thought me an intruder, you looked at me as if I was some cockroach you wanted to squash… I thought—I thought the same thing I thought with Dew: Get over yourself, Erwin, she can’t love you. And you can’t let her know you love her.”

Without noticing, Olivier pulled her closer, until Zinnia’s back was part of Olivier’s chest.

“You were wrong,” Olivier only said. “And I was wrong, too, to let you go.”
“I would have left,” Zinnia said, now between audible sobs. She didn’t try to hide her face. Instead, she rolled so Olivier would see it. The redness over her cheeks, under her eyes. The tears marring the softness of her skin. “So I just wanted to say … thank you. For kissing me. Because it would have been a mistake to leave you. I can’t ever leave you, Olivier. I never had it in me.”

Olivier kissed her, then, just like she had kissed her months ago. And it was the same promise, the very same. Nobody’s leaving. But that was a lie. Because Olivier was. Again.

And she didn’t plan to take Zinnia back north with her.

How Miles had found the phone number of the Erwin family, Olivier didn’t want to know. It entailed too many details that meant he was waist-deep in her personal life, and that wasn’t comfortable to think about. But the call, at least, meant good news. Finally, Central had fixed the lines.

Miles was the one to update her on everything, his voice more stable than at the funeral. That was how she found out Mustang’s ultimate dream had been truncated with the electoral victory of General Grumman. Although, judging by what Miles told her, Mustang still had that promotion to work with and plenty of ideas to make Amestris a livable and fair country.

The news came fast and hard at her chest.

“Mustang has asked me to stay in Central,” Miles said. “There is an Ishval initiative he wants me to lead. And … I said yes.”

Olivier’s heart almost stopped in her ribcage. The final result of all of that was that Miles would … stay behind, stay south. He would stay where Buccaneer had been buried, but she had already lost him, she didn’t think she could endure losing Miles as well.

She almost forbade him to go, and she had the authority to. But Miles had come to her in all his love for rules and discipline, fearful of meeting death in her eyes, and instead he had grown into a man that appreciated mischief in its just measure and knew how to fear without letting it ruin him. Olivier couldn’t throw that away in his name. It was his choice to make.

“And that’s not all,” Miles continued. “I have been in contact with Scar since the hospital. Since before, even, when I was traveling with his group under your command. But now it’s more than just politeness directed at a stranger.”

Scar, the Ishvalan avenger. Olivier knew him well enough. It was only a matter of fate that Miles and him had met. They were crystal-clear opposites in their mourning for the outcome of the Ishval War. Scar had lashed out, Miles had compressed his rage and chosen to follow order above all things. But, after all, Miles—unlike Scar—hadn’t been alone.

“He needs a second chance, sir. Just like I did.”

“And you think you can reinsert him into society?” Olivier had had a vague idea of a plan when she had met Scar. There was still a war to be fought north and she had imagined she would try to recruit him at Briggs and help them with alkahestry. But this initiative of Mustang’s could also help the country. Ishval was a wound that needed to heal, even if its healing began years later.

Miles was quiet for a minute, his breath the only audible thing over the phone. It was curious that she
had chosen those words exactly, but that had been, word for word, what Olivier had done with Miles when Bradley’s Order had been passed. She had taken a young boy afraid of war and repercussions and his peers’ intolerance and showed him to the world with pride. This is my adjutant, Miles, and he serves under me just as validly as any of you would if you were so lucky to be him. Olivier had reinserted him into the military that hated Ishvalans and had made them all forget that hatred, had made them learn to love Miles, a little trembling dove that had flown into the right hands.

Of course, Scar was not a dove. He was a murderer, and no matter where his last allegiances had lain during the Promised Day, that blood on his hand didn’t just wash off.

“Yes…” he replied now, hesitatingly.

Olivier only kept quiet for a second, but it was the longest second of Miles’s life.

“Then that’s done. Make your calls, major. Tell Mustang you have my approval and my orders to begin this… project. And tell him to shave that ridiculous beard of his.” Mustang had already had a hint of a beard the last time she had seen him, and, used to his impeccable clear-shaven looks, she didn’t think she could ever learn to love it. Not that she would ever love anything Mustang.

“Yes, sir,” Miles said, and then he paused before her said, “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for.”

In all his eternal solemnity of a soldier who had seen too much to ever not appreciate someone like her, Miles said:

“There is much to be thankful to you for, Olivier.”

“Well, don’t tell me. I don’t want to hear it,” Olivier grumbled.

He hung up first, almost laughing. And Olivier thought it was alright. Miles needed to laugh again. He deserved to.

Lunches in family, selling meat dressed in one of Zinnia’s dresses that stuck to her skin, kissing when no one was looking and kissing like teenagers when everyone did, the smell of candle and flame when she went to sleep, Mr. Erwin’s stories about times Olivier didn’t remember and times she hadn’t lived, little insights about Zinnia’s childhood chasing bugs and counting stars, strolls at sunset through the entire town, “I wanted to kiss Dew here, but I want you kiss you more”, sitting in one of the cows’ many fields and watching the trains from Central move in the distance like lightning bugs. Loving this will make it harder to leave. Olivier let leaving become one of those thoughts she postponed, because dinner was too delicious, Zinnia was too pretty in just her underwear, and life was easy and simple without orders and soldiers and wars.

A war had been won, another awaited. And Olivier had to go. She had to return to Central and gather her troops, find a train big enough for all of them and never look back. Because these days had been a gift she couldn’t accept, a peek into a life she couldn’t have. She was Olivier Armstrong and she was a soldier, nothing about her life was going to be simple and easy.

Least of all telling Zinnia about this. This, leaving. Leaving because of duty, again. Leaving and not wanting to take Zinnia with her. Because Zinnia still woke up some nights, sweaty and panting, and Olivier knew she dreamt of the war. Olivier was the one with the physical scars and the arm injury that seemed to be getting better yet not better enough, but those healed with time and patience. The
marks the Promised Day had left in Zinnia couldn’t be measured or examined. Neither of them could begin to understand just how deep they were, how life-changing. And wherever they fell in that spectrum, Olivier didn’t want to drag Zinnia into a war that could even be rawer, bloodier than this one.

When Briggs had made the choice to come down south for Olivier, they had willingly chosen to let Drachma cross the border, pillage their towns and conquer every square inch of land they stepped on. If they had stayed, Briggs would have obliterated Drachma. But Briggs had left, and now Briggs would have it tougher to win, especially since so many men had fallen. *Especially without Miles and Buccaneer.*

Briggs wouldn’t be Briggs without them and without Zinnia, but Olivier knew she was to die in war, and she didn’t want any of her closest friends to meet that same end. If that made her selfish, she would gladly admit it. If it made her disloyal to her promises, so be it. It was—no more, no less—what she wanted.

And sooner or later she would have to tell Zinnia.

The sun was setting, orange and pink and purple over the grey of the clouds, and Olivier and Zinnia had walked far enough for today. After these many days, Olivier knew by heart the streets Zinnia used to run through as a child. She associated tiny spots of the town with Zinnia’s memories. *I scraped a knee here,* she said once, pointing at one of the few paved ways of Airedale. *My first kiss was in this school,* Zinnia explained when they’d passed the building where she’d gone to high school. The town was made of memories and little else, seen from this perspective. Olivier had learned them all, so one day she could tell the stories Zinnia didn’t feel she could.

Today, something was different. Perhaps the sun heated a little bit more intensely, maybe it was just that more people had gradually returned to the town, or possibly the feeling of calmness, as if standing in front of the smooth and changing surface of a lake, was greater today than any other day.

Olivier and Zinnia had sat in the stairs to an old house, slightly bigger than most of the other dwellings, and had simply breathed in the scent of the newly come spring, finally settling in for good. It was a soft prelude to a summer that was rumored to be hotter than the last. Zinnia dreamed of ice cream and Olivier of watching her lick the melted drops that slid down on the cone, and sometimes they spoke about it in sentences that would never convey how much they wanted to relive the feeling of the last summer. The two of them, on opposite sides of Iver, watching each other out of the corner of their eyes, wishing with all their hearts that what they hoped was there between them was real.

Before the world had gone to shit, before war had knocked on their doors, before they had come to terms with the fact that having something between them didn’t make everything easier and sometimes just complicated things more.

When they were quiet, Olivier’s conscience hammered at her with urgency. Each second of silence was a reminder than she was keeping secrets again, when she had promised she wouldn’t. And, in the end, she spoke a painful truth that didn’t hurt more than hiding it.

“I’m going back north.”

“What?” Zinnia said, unsure of having heard right. “You—you can’t. You’re still healing.” She pointed at Olivier’s arm, still in a string, as if that served as enough evidence.

“I can heal at home.” It wasn’t like a broken arm would stop Drachma from advancing, taking up more and more of what rightfully belonged to Amestris. And it wasn’t like she couldn’t give orders without an arm. The same arm that Buccaneer had watched be severed off his shoulder, so if he had been able to fight for as long as he had without that, so would she.
“But…there’s so much to do here.”

The new government, Mustang’s many initiatives, the rebuilding of the city, Armstrong birthdays, days spent in the sun or the grass. Zinnia had been hoping to extend their stay in Central as long as Olivier had guessed Mustang would keep her there. This left her speechless.

“There is,” Olivier agreed, calmly. Her chest was on fire and she only wished for more air to blow it out, but she had to keep calm. She couldn’t turn this into a conversation like the ones they’d had at the hospital. “And everybody is already on it. I can’t stand sitting at tables and discussing options, doing nothing.” Olivier needed action and she was going where she would find it. “The north needs its wall.”

“You’re more than a fucking wall, did you know that?”

Lately, Olivier had learned to be more than that, but deep in her heart she knew that where she was most useful was where she could do more than sign papers and make agreements. The world had named her the northern wall of Briggs because what made the fort as formidable as the stories had turned it to be was the presence of its general, always there, always attentive, always ready to call her soldiers to arms.

“I’m taking my army home.”

The army that had come to save her and had fallen in the way, the army that needed to go back to win the war as much as she did. Those men would enjoy themselves in Central as much as they could, would involve themselves in the restoration of the city as well, but sooner than later the heat would get to them, the inaction would crowd their nightmares and all they would be able to do in order to run faster than their demons of the Promised Day was go back home, where they would be able to literally shoot at them.

“Okay,” Zinnia said, taking a deep breath. “So when are we going?”

“Not ‘we’.”

“What’d you mean, not ‘we’? You’re not seriously hinting that I should stay?” Zinnia laughed at the sheer idiocy of it, oblivious to the fact that, indeed, that was what Olivier had in mind.

Right now, the truth hurt more than having to lie about it.

“You’re no use to me in the fort. I think you’ll be safer here. Happier.”

Zinnia had told her that once, when the discussion had been about going south, not north. *I’m of no use on this fort, I’ve never been.* And Olivier had spoken about Zinnia being Briggs’ soul. Suddenly, Olivier didn’t need that soul, did she? It was such an obvious lie that Zinnia laughed loudly.

“And you think that because…? Have you met my mum? Have you met Anthony, who will always look at me like I owe him something?” Zinnia said. “I left because this isn’t the place for me. But I stayed in and returned to your godforsaken province for a reason, and I’m going back there because I still believe in that reason.”

Her eyes, browner than ever in the sunset light, said something else. *I still believe in you, Olivier.* Despite the many lies and secrets and promises Olivier hadn’t been able to keep, Zinnia still believed. It softened her heart, once hardened and cold. Because sometimes all it took was someone at her side, supporting her in silence and words alike, in the uproar of battle and the asphyxiating stretched days of peace.
Olivier wanted to beg her to stay, to live out the rest of her days in warm Central where flowers were very much alive in the fields surrounding the city and it didn’t snow and there were plenty of amazing men and women and those who were neither to love that wouldn’t do this to her every time a new conflict rose. The life of a soldier was conflict, and their duty always to choose it over anything else, even life. Even death.

“It’s war up there,” Olivier said. She had to try. She had to at least warn her, be honest about it like she hadn’t been about the Promised Day. “It’s always going to be war until we win it. Are you sure you want to be there for it?”

In the end, it all came down to that question, asked in all seriousness as it could be no other way. It hid another question in its words: *Are you sure you want to die with me, wherever I go, however it happens?*

And Zinnia, who had come south expecting to die, who had walked for four days through the western mountains, who had made her way through the battlefield of the streets of Central City, who had killed men and monsters alike—Zinnia, who had closed her eyes and held Olivier closer when Sloth had been about to smash them—replied in all solemnity, her eyes looking into Olivier’s, made of pieces of the sky rather than just ice. She put a hand on Olivier’s right shoulder, careful of the wound, and Olivier covered it with her own, squeezing it slightly.

“Where else, Olivier? Where else would I want to be?”

*Where else but by your side.*

So it was north that they went, a hundred and fifty men returning home, three hundred and fifty Central men—courtesy of Brigadier Mustang—ready to face the cold of Briggs for the first time. The train was there, carrying not only what would be the new population of Fort Briggs, but also the tanks and plenty of ammunition and food.

The noise was almost unforgivable, if one forgot where those men had just come from, if one forgot the horrors they had seen and the horrors they had kept from fully unleashing. Austin, a boy turned men in the slopes of the Briggs mountain range, talked animatedly with boys his age who had been assigned north about how beautiful it all once, how *nice* Olivier was, and how everything was worth it because Briggs was, after all, the most beautiful of all destinations.

Sitting only a few benches away from him, Olivier couldn’t help but smile at the sheer incontinence of joy in his voice. He spoke with reverence of everything she had helped build. He had fought for her, no questions asked, and she was glad to be taking him back home. She would be a mother again, the protector of all these men who, in turn, protected her with their lives. Many were missing, but many more had filled those empty holes, not matching the shape of them completely.

When the train crossed the border with the Northern Area, most Central men exclaimed at the sight of snow in spring, Briggs just sighed, feeling they were back where they belonged. Olivier had missed the snow, the contrasts of black rock and white snow. And the sky. Blue. Bluer than her eyes.

Northern City received them hours later. It was not a warm welcome, but it sufficed. The city had armed itself to the teeth against Drachma. Walls of iron had been built around the city for protection of its citizens, although, they were told, most people had emigrated south. No one liked the sound of war approaching. No one, except the soldiers of Briggs, who marched happily over stomped snow
and the thin flowers that were beginning to grow underneath. The walk wasn’t excessively long and the sun shone pleasantly, and since nobody in the city would risk taking so many people even further north with Drachma out there, there was no other choice.

As they walked, they sang old songs that stunk of beer and sweat and yet still managed to make the heart lighter in their chests.

For a long time we've been
Marching off to battle
In our thundering herd
We feel a lot like cattle
Like the pounding beat
Our aching feet aren't
Easy to ignore
Hey, think of instead
A girl worth fighting for
That's what I said
A girl worth fighting for

“I refuse to believe any of you are straight!” said one of the soldiers from Central.

“People are bi, Stevenson,” someone from Briggs replied.

They all laughed after that and just kept singing until they saw Briggs in the distance, as mighty a wall as they remembered her. It wept, like a wall of ice, in the spring sun. But its iron was just as stoic as ever.

Some ran when they saw it, some just let their jaws drop at the sight of it. There was nothing alike it in all of Amestris and there would never be. What happened in Fort Briggs stayed in Fort Briggs, where loyalty was stronger than any weapon and where brave and loving men dwelled. And for some in this crowd being there would be a beautiful journey towards understanding why.

Finally, after a long, long time—longer than years and longer than decades in the hearts of those who had missed it most—the gates of Briggs opened and its general walked in, her steps echoing in all the empty space.

Briggs, empty. Devoid of people and noise and the heat of the boilers all over the lower levels.

Olivier had to lean on a wall with her hand to stop herself from fainting. Empty, her fort empty… She felt all the losses at once. Buccaneer, who sang terribly but always had words for those who needed them, who spread gossip and love in equal measure, whose thunderous laughter was the soundtrack of every lugubrious day spent in the shadow of a cloud. Miles, who had chosen a different path for himself after so long following someone else’s footsteps, who would make a better world for those an old war had stolen everything from, whose wise and calm advice Olivier would miss almost as much as she would miss Buccaneer’s infamous and crazy comments.
Empty. Fort Briggs was empty. But she had brought people to inhabit it again, to give it light and sound and make it vibrate with the pride inherent to its sturdy walls.

She felt Zinnia’s hand on her shoulder, tentative.

Olivier smiled. I am fine.

When the lights came on, she saw what Drachma had done to her beautiful fort. Scratches on the wall and a few tables flipped over. Drachma had found nothing here to steal or kill, so they had left Briggs as it was, because what could they do with an empty fort? Whatever had been damaged, they would rebuild it into its old glory, perhaps into a new one.

Because the war had been here.

And the true war had started now that they were, too.

Olivier turned to face her men, still hesitant to come in, and gave her first order as Lieutenant General:

“Let’s get those tanks ready, gentlemen.”

Chapter End Notes

I am not ready for this to end. Someone please hold me and tell me it’s all going to be fine.
Epilogue—Journey’s End

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Three years later, with the last snows of 1918, Briggs was winning a war, the war that Olivier finally was allowed to wage, after having had it taken away from her the first time. Drachma had tried anything from both flanks of the fort and Drachma had failed to cut off their supplies, bomb them, and fight them openly. Each time Drachma had planned on attacking, Briggs was there, armed and ready. And each time, Briggs had won a new battle.

Fort Briggs had never thrived this much. Years ago, Olivier had studied the possibility of getting an alchemist to work with them, someone capable that would endure the harsh life that awaited there. Izumi Curtis had knocked on her door, and they’d been working together since to safely get the soldiers’ rations to the fort safely, without Drachma’s interference, and keep it defended day and night. When asked about why she’d taken the job, Izumi had sighed and said: “Let’s just say I have fond memories of these lands.”

After some time, Drachma had stopped fighting with so much fervor, their attempts weaker and weaker as the months passed and they still had not even managed to smell the saccharine scent of their first victory. Then, one day, Olivier had received word that the enemy wanted a truce and open negotiations in order to stop this senseless war that their side kept losing.

It was what consumed her days and most of her nights now, phoning Central to get approval and drafting proposals, crossing things off. In short, paperwork. Sweet old paperwork that already guaranteed a fully fledged triumph.

She was lost in penalty clauses and things that sometimes almost escaped her understanding when there was a knock on her door. It had been a few months since the last time she had imagined it was Buccaneer, but it had not even been a day since she’d last visited his gravestone without a body buried beneath it in Briggs’ cemetery.

“I got the situation maps all ready to go,” Zinnia said. “I think they’re a bit more adjusted to Drachma’s location than last week. We can send an advanced party to begin the negotiations whenever you’re ready.”

Olivier looked up immediately from her papers.

After so long, Zinnia still insisted on wearing the uniform. Olivier thought she was the first civilian to care so much about something usually only soldiers understood, but she wouldn’t complain. Without Zinnia’s knowledge of maps and tracking, and her experience in the field, it would have taken longer to anticipate to some of Drachma’s attacks. Indirectly as it was, her assistance had helped save lives.

“Let me finish the terms of the negotiation first,” Olivier said. “It’ll be done soon.”

Behind those words there was an implicit ‘you can stay’ that Zinnia didn’t dare question. She hadn’t, not for a long time.

So she came towards Olivier, leaving the maps on the table, and wrapped her arms around Olivier to lean softly on her shoulder, almost rubbing her face against it.

“How does it feel to be the victor of your war, General Armstrong?” Zinnia whispered in her ear, her hands lowering from the shoulders to Olivier’s upper chest, slightly flattened by the uniform.
“You tell me,” Olivier murmured, turning her face just a little to give Zinnia a kiss. “You’ve won it with me.”

Zinnia thought about it. How did she feel? Lately, she had had this feeling in her chest, something that hadn’t always been there before. It was warm and thick like honey in the sun, and it was breathy. The wind reverberated often through the pores of it and Zinnia always closed her eyes to enjoy it, just like she did the spring breeze.

She closed her eyes now and kissed Olivier back, like old lovers, like new couples, like only they could. They moved around each other like the sun and the earth, the universe their home. This fort was theirs.


Once, Zinnia had run away. Thrice, she had refused to run. All in the name of a home she hadn’t known, back then, was at a wall between mountains and a woman’s heart. But it was possible, after all, for one to find a home in the place one least expected to, an iron fort in the snow with men and a general as her only company. One could really build one’s own home from scratch and stop running to find arbitrary shelter.

Zinnia had.

Chapter End Notes

Half a year, it’s been half a year since I typed the last line, since I sat down to revise the last chapters. And the pain of having finished is still with me, because it wasn’t really over then. Now, it is.

I’m a writer, but I have no words. What this story has meant to me, not only as a fan but also as a content creator, cannot be expressed. And the many people who have shared it with me, both from behind the scenes and as they started to read the fic on AO3, they really have no idea how much it’s all meant to me, being able to grow by their side, being able to witness what can come out of fandom.

I’m not going to go overboard here with acknowledgments because they’d take up so much space. Everything there is to tell about how Adversity came to be and all the people that helped make it the fic of my life goes on here, a little overview of Adversity curiosities and new info.

I said it is over now, and the main story is. But … anyone who knows me a little knows that I just can’t let go of Olivier and Zinnia. Like Doctor Who says, they’ve seared on to my heart. And there’s no relocating them now. Adversity, as it is, ends here, with chapter 64—an homage to the anime that first introduced me to the wonderful, magnificent story Hiromu Arakawa wrote. But I’ve prepared something special to be posted soon here on my AO3 profile—a few gifts, a few extra moments for those who, like me, can’t seem to let go of this fic.

This means, as I like to say, that the official ending gets postponed a couple of weeks. I wonder how many endings I can take before I am ready to assume that it just can never end, not really.
End Notes

I babble a lot about how my fics are coming along on my twitter, and I also retweet pretty things and experience many feels in many languages ^^

Works inspired by this one [I Won't Leave You Behind by LittleDesertFlower](https://archiveofour.org/works/39000256/uncategorized/i-wont-leave-you-behind)

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