The Titan Queen

by RiaZ

Summary

Y/N L/N. She had always been a dangerous girl - flame in her eyes and sparks in her smirk. It didn't matter that no one had recognized it - that razor smile, that sharp wit and even sharper tongue. It was their loss. It was his loss.

Can Levi Ackerman fight the battle between himself, his humanity and literally everything else destined to keep him away from the girl that he loves?

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
No one talks about how captivating darkness can be.

They talk about the danger that could ultimately be hidden within its embrace, the monsters that it keeps as its pets. They say that darkness is something that everyone once came from, and one day must return to.

But no one talks about how time within darkness seems to be non-existent; how a small piece of eternity lies within the heart of the black depths.

True darkness – no one talks about that.

The woman stood – in true, unending darkness – at her balcony, listening to the pure lack of sound that the night was making. The moon was hooded, cloaking the land from any hint of light that it had promised on each other night. The woman didn’t seem to care about the cold, however, as her dress rustled and whispered with the wind that rushed past her skirts, rattling the doors behind her.

The male she had left inside the room snarled in his sleep, to which the woman merely cast an irritated look behind her as she turned her attention back to the balcony. From her perch, she could see all the windows of her home – and pinpoint who was awake, and who was not. It was a passive power to have, to own; but in her position, in her life, any power would be one that she used.

No one seemed to realize that the thing she became when surrounded by the beasts was not the same thing that lurked behind their skins. But where once she would have gloated and dared to defy, she had learned to contain it to moments like these, where she was alone in the infinite darkness.

But the night almost quivered in excitement as she couldn’t help but let out a little laugh, her finger encircling the ring that she wore, a habit that she’d picked up since she had started wearing it. So many symbols, the woman wore. The dress, the ring, the crown. She let them clothe her in symbols, let them believe blindly that she was theirs and nothing else.

Their ignorance was her power, too.

And with it, she’d end the world and forge the new one.
The girl drew an arrow and notched it to her bow with quick, quiet movements. Downwards in the glen, a wary doe had emerged from the thicket despite the snow. “Raven,” the girl’s partner breathed, her dark eyes fixed firmly on the slim creature, “don’t let it run.” Raven, apparently, did not appreciate her partner’s caution. Ire flickered in her grey eyes as she let a breath loose and then let the arrow follow with an amateur’s aim.

Raven did not look at all like her name suggested. Hair that would have been a white blond if it weren’t for a week’s worth of dirt hung around her pale face – and her grey eyes looked like they could have competed for the prize of being the coldest with the very snow on the ground.

But those grey eyes glowed as her arrow found its mark.

Her partner let out a whoop as the doe fell, its too-thin body making only a little noise against the ground. Raven tutted, her eyes fixed on nothing but the source of her next meal as she slung the bow into place at her back and began to run towards it. There was not a moment to waste in these woods – not when there were worse predators then herself out, hidden by the trees.

She slipped her knife out from the hidden pocket in her sleeve as she neared the animal. “It’s too small, Rachel. Too small to last everyone for a while.” Winter had always been a tough time – especially to those people who lived on the outside of the infamous walls that kept the rest of the human population safe.

But a winter where they were increasingly wary of the other predators on the other side of the forest?

That was worse.

But hunger had drawn both girls from the safety of the outskirts and had coaxed them into the depths. Raven had a little sister to feed, and Rachel was not about to let her lover just walk into the forest alone. Rachel’s dark-skinned hand snuck into caress Raven’s elbow as she dropped to her knees before the doe that would be their salvation only for a short while. It was their reassurance – it was the touch that said ‘I’m okay. I’m here.’

But then Rachel’s hand abandoned contact with her lover’s elbow, and Raven froze a beat before a deep male tenor rang through the silence of the forest.

“And just what are you two doing here?”

The girl clenched the knife in her hand tightly enough that her knuckles went white, slowly looking over her shoulder. Her mate stood before her – without a weapon, without armour – with her arms outstretched, as if she could shield Raven from the beast before them with nothing but her body.

The thought died on Raven’s lips as she opened them to beg Rachel to run. The thing in front of them did not look like a beast.

No.

He was one of the most beautiful people that Raven had ever seen. His dark brown curls had been cropped close to his face, with his pale skin almost glowing against the snow. His eyes, though – at first glance, Raven could have easily seen them as black. But they were brown – and utterly fixed upon Rachel.
“Do you know what we are?” The words boiled in Raven’s ears. Not who they were, but what they were. The fact the male had deliberately chosen his words to answer his question for them showed enough about his intentions. Raven, in a moment of utter stillness, realized that she’d never see her little sister again.

A snort sounded from behind the male, and a girl elbowed her way past him to stand at the front. Raven immediately abandoned any thoughts of the male’s beauty aside – this girl was born to demand attention, as surely as she breathed. It wasn’t so much that she had beauty; she commanded focus by the way she held herself, by the way that she glowed with something that Raven could not quite place. ‘How unfair,’ she thought to herself. ‘How unfair that the beasts are beautiful.’

“Do you know what we are,” mimicked the girl, rolling her eyes at the male. “Is that seriously what you say to inspire fear, Orion?” Orion – Raven could have sniggered at the name, had she not been starting to inch back. Orion for the hunter in the sky, for the giant, for the one unmatched with a bow.

Her own skill was useless – it was only due to hours of practice over the past winter that she’d managed to hone it enough to sometimes hit animals that could provide meat. Raven knew she’d be dead before she even sent a hand skittering towards her quiver.

But she had a knife in her hand. Perhaps she should use it to cut her own throat.

“Oh, no – don’t you just leave,” the girl crooned, her eyes fastening on the way that Raven had inched further away from them. “These are our woods. You were hunting in them.”

“Let her go,” Rachel said, her voice not showing an ounce of fear. Raven’s heart ached. “Let her go and take me, kill me, eat me. I don’t care.” The girl cocked her head and Raven shivered as she watched those eyes calculate. That move was not human, she decided. Rachel seemed to not care that the pair in front of her were nothing but creatures of darkness wearing beautiful skins – she threw back her head fiercely, rolling her shoulders. “So? Do we have a deal?”

There was a beat of silence.

“No,” the girl answered, and Raven could only watch as Orion’s smile grew. It was the sight of that small piece of absolute cruelty that had her cursing her shoddy aim.

Raven threw the knife anyway.

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“I can’t believe that we had to leave the deer,” Orion seethed, hitching the darker-skinned girl’s lifeless body higher on his back.

“I wasn’t exactly planning on one of them killing the other,” his companion seethed, sarcasm lashing out with a whip’s brutality. It failed to find its mark – Orion’s eyes merely gleamed in the late sun, fixed entirely on the girl walking just a few feet to his side.

Her own E/C eyes were alight with a glow of insanity, even as they remained set on the faintly trodden path leading uphill. Her breathing remained light, regular – despite the body that she too bore on her back. Her charge was still breathing – the E/C-eyed monster had only knocked her out after she’d thrown a dagger right into the back of her partner’s head, desperation etched onto every inch of her face.

Desperation made people do stupid things – especially in the name of love.
Orion pulled his attention away from the human and again honed it in on his own partner. “That deer – think of the meat we’ve just left there for the other humans to get at.”

“If you want to go back and drag that carcass along with that girl’s, be my guest,” she snapped back, ignoring the way that Orion’s eyes narrowed in response to her idle attitude. “But I think you’re struggling enough lugging her body, let alone adding a deer.”

It was an empty quip; Orion was barely winded from climbing up the path towards the castle that the royalty had adopted for the winter. Months running around trying to lose trackers had meant that all those in the royal household were fit enough to run for much longer, in much harsher terrains.

“I can see you looking at my arms in delight,” Orion snipped back, flexing said muscles despite himself. “Don’t think that I don’t notice.”

“Indeed, how foolish of me. Why would you ever miss a chance to fall deeper in love with yourself?”

Orion bared his teeth at her as the huge gate loomed into view, the black banner of the royal family peaking over the white ground. “Why not love someone who’s worth it?”

“Fine words for someone who’s about to trip.”

Orion stumbled in his step and halted, his eyes dropping from where they’d been fixed mockingly on her face and onto the ground. For a few seconds, they scanned the ground with an efficiency that the girl might have once been impressed with – but instead of watching him evaluate the lack of tripping hazards, she was widening her steps until she was borderline jogging ahead of him. She smiled as she heard a barked curse as the gate was drawn up, courtesy of the lookouts spying the two humans that the joint hunt had yielded.

“That was a petty trick to resort to, princess.”

In response to the whispered words and the breath that he blew down her neck, the girl shrugged violently, cracking into Orion’s jaw sharply with her free shoulder as she sauntered forwards, trudging through the mush of the courtyard. Enjoying the snarled swear words that echoed in the background, the girl watched her subjects bustle around, trying to keep warm in the early spring temperature, their cloaks dragging in the mud and far worse brown substances.

She did not miss the way that their eyes narrowed in on the body sagging over her shoulder, a familiar spark lighting their faces into hungry grins. Meeting each of their gazes with a dominant stare of her own, she allowed her lip to curl.

Striding through the courtyard and heading towards the kitchens, she allowed herself to bask in their attention, in herself.

“Wipe that grin off your face,” Orion snapped. “You look like a fool.”

“Oh, no,” she said, her grin stretching even wider. “I’d hate to look like you.”

“Stop it, Y/N.”

The moment that the name had left his lips, the girl dropped the body onto the floor and straightened up, all hints of the strain fleeing from her stature. Orion did not cower, even as she set a gaze full of blistering wrath directly on his face.
He had known exactly what he had said.

The punch that followed seemed to be an easy dodge – Orion ducked the blow that would have hit his face easily, the girl’s balance thrown off in her anger. But as the male straightened up, his face drawn into mocking features, the girl followed through with her curl, lifting her leg straight up to smash her heel into his jaw.

The onlookers merely caught each other’s eyes and moved on, their behaviour suggesting that this was perhaps an ordinary happening. But the girl again stood up, brushing dust from her jacket, and heaved the body back over her shoulder. She stalked off, leaving Orion cupping his bleeding face in the dirt, fixing her back with an enemy’s stare.

“The girl with that name died months ago,” the princess’ voice said. “I will not have her name live on.”

“Forgive me,” Orion said, spitting out blood as he did so. To anyone else, his tone might have seemed charming, playful. But from the way that the girl’s back stiffened as she pulled open the door to the kitchens and slipped inside, Orion knew that his hidden insolence had hit home.

He’d pay for it later, he knew. Maybe she’d throw another punch or ask him to practice sword-fighting with her – knowing that she was infinitely better than he was with a blade.

But Orion enjoyed the fact that a simple name had power over his partner – even if she now went by another.

It wasn’t as though he disliked her new name, the name she’d chosen for herself after tearing through dictionaries of different languages. He even liked the way that it sounded on his tongue, the way that when he said it, she glared at him. When she’d claimed it, it was as though the name was an answer to a question his body had been asking for eternity. He could almost hear it thrumming through his veins, echoing in his heart – Belua. Belua. Belua.

Belua.

No, he didn’t dislike her new name.

Instead, he hated the way that he adored it. The way that he adored her, in what twisted way he could.

He’d rather use an old name that irked her – better that then give the titan who held his heart in her cruel, monstrous hands the knowledge that he was a slave to her new one.

Orion did not like knowing that he was slave, and that she didn’t even know it.

But he couldn’t help that he adored it nonetheless.
“You were not supposed to join that hunt.”

The princess, to her credit, didn’t flinch as her uncle shoved his face close enough to hers that Orion didn’t doubt that she could feel the heat of his breath on her skin. Her Mother was seated on her throne, looking down the hall to where her brother and daughter squared off – with such impassiveness that even Orion, lingering at the door, could sense her disapproval emanating throughout the otherwise empty hall.

“I will do whatever I want,” Belua snarled back, her hand clenching into a fist hard enough for her own nails to bite into her palm. Orion rolled his eyes at her frustration, at her dramatics – but the girl stiffened, turned and shot him a glowering look. How she knew what he’d done to deserve her reaction, Orion had no clue – but it sent a thrill down his body nonetheless. “Don’t you act all innocent. Get in here.”

Orion held her gaze and bowed his head with a cockiness that made her nose flare in anger, before taking a few steps to stand at her side. He pulled himself up, matching Belua’s uncle’s glare with one of his own until the male took a step back from Belua. “Without her, I would have settled for the deer. Are you telling me that you would prefer venison again, in preference to two humans?”

Lord L/N shot him a poisonous look, but it was quickly overshadowed by something else – hunger. “I will not deny that this time, her participation yielded pleasant results. But ordinarily, she cannot be allowed to do as she wishes. She’s unruly, disobedient, utterly wild – and entirely not fit to rule.”

Orion shot wild girl a smirk, knowing that fury was probably burning in her blood at this point. But she merely disregarded his glee and focused her wrath on the real position of power in the room. “Mother – I have brought you two humans for our meal tonight. Does that displease you?”

Shutting down an internal wince as the Queen fixed her daughter with an evil, nonchalant eye, Orion’s hand covered the pommel of his sword. He couldn’t yet wield it to the skill that Belua could – but it was his symbol to use as he saw fit. As long as he could swing it, heads would roll; Orion did not care for dramatics when it came to those he killed. “My unruly, disobedient and utterly wild daughter. Such things do not make for a good princess.”

“If I were a good princess, you would have had me slaughtered in my cradle.”

“Be that as it may, you do not seem like a princess deigned to rule from the throne-room.”

“I will rule wherever I am, with whatever skills and attitudes that I see fit.”

Orion shot Belua a warning glance from the corner of his eye – there was such a fine line when it came to disobedience and rebellion. Both were dangerous when they came under use of her – and to the Queen’s face, no less.

The Queen raised a slender eyebrow, and Orion held his breath.

Once, his allegiance would have been entirely to the throne. He wanted to rule, he wanted a crown, he wanted creatures to bow to him and throw hated glances at him from where their brows touched the floor. If the Queen had told him to execute her heir, Orion would have only hesitated for a heartbeat – a heartbeat to feel a rush of fear for the girl that his human self had cherished.
But the hesitation would have only lasted for a heartbeat.

Now, that had changed. It had changed from the moment that the princess had been tied up by her humans and dumped into the ground at his feet – and had still managed to treat him like he was the one that had been kneeling before her.

His allegiance was still to the throne – but now, it was only if Belua were the one sitting on it.

“If you have a problem with my daughter, you do not have to partake in the feast she has provided for tonight,” the Queen told her brother. Orion watched his chest swell with a breath, but then the Lord’s face slacked and went impassive.

Orion and Belua weren’t the only ones who toed a fine line between rebellion and disobedience.

Lord L/N faced the two of them with a lesser forgiving growl. “Get out. Don’t forget your duties.”

Belua didn’t bother bowing her head to her uncle as she stalked out, but Orion couldn’t afford that insolent luxury. The merest inclination of his head was all he could stomach giving the male titan before he turned and followed his princess from the room.

Two males were waiting for them outside, one face solemn and the other grinning. The girl groaned when she saw them but elbowed the taller male to make him grimace even more. “What happened to you covering for us, Bertoldt?”

“If you wanted someone to lie to the Queen, you should’ve asked Annie,” Bertoldt answered, shooting a nervous glance at his companion.

“If I had told Annie, she would have insisted on coming,” Belua answered, leading the group down a staircase and grabbing a wooden torch.

“Milady wanted to have some alone time,” Orion muttered to Reiner, who only grinned more in response. The blond, muscled titan had fast become his friend in the months since returning to the castle – and together with Bertoldt, the three of them made up one of the strongest courts that the Royal families had ever seen.

Belua hissed. “I heard that.”

“Good, I was worried that I’d said it too quietly.”

As their group descended into the darkness broken only by the flames wielded by the princess, Orion started laughing louder, jostling boisterously with Reiner to provoke a louder sound of swear words to echo on the walls. He owed it to Belua, who steadily got more and more quiet.

Belua was not scared of many things; in fact, she’d proclaimed most days that she was fearful only of a future where she could not rule. But Orion noticed when she never went to sleep in a completely dark room, when she sank further into insanity whenever she visited the dungeons below any of the castles that her family had chosen for themselves. Insanity had become her shield – she’d managed to convince herself that she was more dangerous than anything waiting in the cold, threatening dark.

But Orion needed her to be strong – he relied on her title and her strength almost as much as she did. So, he laughed louder, made more jokes – drawing Bertoldt and Reiner’s attention closer to him, rather than them becoming suspicious about their unusually quiet leader.

She ruined his efforts to draw her two companions’ attention away from her when she barked a
curse and drew a dagger faster than Orion could blink. One moment, they were mere steps away from the door that opened to the dungeon. The next, the door had been opened suddenly from the other side and Belua was circling the culprit with both torch and dagger.

“Practicing being dignified today, are we?”

Orion couldn’t help but bear his teeth at Annie Leonhardt, the female’s eyes already firmly on Belua with attitude written on every inch of her body. With monumental effort, he attempted to slow his heart rate and slid his sword back into its pommel, the blade winking in the flickering firelight. “What are you doing here, Annie?”

“I thought you already knew,” the female said, stepping aside and allowing Belua to stalk past her. Orion gnashed his teeth at her vague answer, shrugged away from Reiner’s warning hand on his shoulder and walked past her, making sure that his shoulder hit hers with impressive gusto.

“We were just down here a mere hour ago, dropping off a live human into one of the cells. What could have happened in that hour?”

Annie snorted from where she was following Orion and Belua with her usual two companions. “We’ve been tracked here, as well.”

Orion felt the familiar rage stir in his stomach. “We’ve been trying to lose them for months, and it hasn’t happened. I say we go out and destroy them, hunt them back. They keep following, leaving us messages and breaking in. Surely we have enough power to stop running and start fighting.”

“We lost over half of our forces in the battle with the humans,” Belua murmured, her steps growing more confident as she walked through the winding corridors, following Annie now. “The Queen said it was better to hide and then strike, rather than spread our forces thin and hunt the trackers. We don’t know how many of them there are; there could be just one dedicated rat, or a hundred of them. We can’t risk losing more titans and giving away our location.”

“And what have they done now-“

Reiner’s question was met with only silence.

They were only on the first level on the dungeon – there was a little light from the thin, hand’s width barred windows from a few of the cells. That alone made it all too easy to see the familiar message splattered across the walls in mud – and blood.

“‘Get Ready’,” Bertoldt read, his voice breaking the eerie silence.

“You can read,” Annie remarked flatly. “Would you like us to clap?”

“How did they get in here?” Belua said, drawing closer to the wall and inspecting the mess on the walls. “We’ve had titans guarding here non-stop. The windows have been tested in all cells. There cannot be any way they could get in.”

“They’ve been saying the same message for months,” Reiner said, leaning against the bars of a cell. “At first, it was threatening – but now they’re just dragging us along, playing with us. They want us to feel tension, to keep moving like we have been.”

“There’s blood mixed into the mud,” Belua tuned in, rubbing off a little of the mixture onto her finger and holding it up to the light. “They’ve killed a titan somewhere, haven’t they?”

Orion watched as Annie met the princess’s gaze. “That’s why I’m down here – they found one of
the servants dead, stuffed behind a wood pile that he’d been chopping. I knew there’d be a message somewhere in the dungeons, like there’s always been.”

Bertoldt sighed quietly. “Only one dead?”

“It’s not much of a message,” Belua mused. “If it were me, I’d have killed three. Just one seems like an accident, like –“

“Like they were in a rush,” Annie finished. Orion watched as those eyes of ice shimmered with an excitement that made his own blood bellow in response.

The bells from the towers above sounded, causing both Annie and Belua to draw their weapons in an instinctive move. “Easy, there,” Orion sneered, deliberately placing his hand on Belua’s elbow. She glowered at him in response – he could practically hear her telling him exactly how she would cut off every one of his fingers and use them to create a unique art piece. The bells rang three times, and then silenced.

“Three rings,” echoed Reiner. Belua grinned; every titan knew what three rings meant.

Humans were near.
“No.”

The princess stomped her foot on the ground, the sharp sound making both Orion and Reiner wince. Annie and Bertoldt merely stayed still, watching the princess again square off against her uncle.

“You’re making us lose time to catch them,” Belua snarled, fury so obvious that her words were almost lost amidst the catches and twists of her growl. “Stop playing Lord and let me go.”

“Orion and the rest of your court can go,” Lord L/N said, pointedly looking at anywhere but Belua – not due to fear, but due to the fact that Belua would now be seeing red. “Apart from Annie. She can stay and make sure that you are exactly where you are supposed to be. You are not sneaking out again – a mere hour after coming back!”

Orion didn’t bother giving Annie a sympathetic look – the female titan would rather accompany her princess over hunting anyway.

“They’re all fools – they need me.”

Orion didn’t blame Reiner for the stubborn hiss in response; he merely rolled his eyes, knowing that it wasn’t true. He’d managed well enough when the girl hadn’t been here. It was that thought that spurred him into twisting on his heel and walking steadily from the room, not bothering to give a farewell. He knew from the footsteps behind him that Reiner and Bertoldt were following him, and all three of them stayed silent until they reached the entrance hall.

Reiner threw him a cloak, the signature black cloaks that were famed amongst titans. He fastened it under his chin, drawing the hood over his curls so that the edge hung just level with his eyes, obscuring his face from any other looking at him.

Orion could have laughed at the sight of the princess’s fuming face as she watched him leave the castle with his hunting crew, but he knew well enough that doing so would be a death sentence. The hunting team had already assembled – a few of them were already seething, already pacing. Anxiety and eagerness rippled off of them in waves; it didn’t take long for that energy to be felt by him in equal measure.

Orion grinned – a bloodthirsty thing that was echoed by all those who watched him bare his teeth. “Let’s go hunt ourselves some humans, shall we?”

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The forest was utterly dead.

There was no sunlight creeping through the empty, depraved branches of the trees; winter had long-since hidden the sun behind a thick, choking blanket of clouds that had leeched all warmth and colour that may have once lit up the world. The grass was wild and unkempt; there were no flowers growing at this time of the year, no flecks of colour anywhere amidst the world of grey, white and brown.

But that didn’t matter to the two girls that were creeping through the undergrowth, their footsteps carefully monitored so that they didn’t disturb the ghostly silence of the ghoulish forest. One girl held a bow ready, the worn wood clenched firmly between her pale fingers, with an arrow already
The girl either didn't seem to notice as her fingers tightened on the arrow – or just didn't care. Her blond hair was drawn back into a messy bun at the top of her neck, a few tendrils escaping to frame her narrow face. Pale skin was drawn tight around her face, the cheekbones sharp and cutting as shadows were cast along her face. But if her skin was pale, it was nothing compared to the pure ice of her eyes. Cold and blue eyes shone with something unstable as the girl darted her gaze back and forth, searching the forest for any sign of life. The girl made no noise except her light breaths as she continued her prowl.

The other girl was quieter still. She was crouched slightly in front of the blond girl, her hands reaching behind to grip handles of twin daggers that were tucked into her tight trousers, the jewels that were embedded in the handles glinting as they moved. This girl knew how to use the blades; she whipped them in front of her with lightning speed, hardly making a noise as the silver slashed through the air. Her E/C eyes were bright with the promise of death.

Reiner sent a silent grimace to Orion as they both watched the girls creep past their hiding place in the undergrowth. Orion was biting on his lip – whether to stop himself laughing at his princess’s poor attempt at remaining unseen or to contain his wrath, Reiner didn’t know. Didn’t want to know if it was something else, either.

It was a rare thing to watch another without them having a clue that one was doing so. An even rarer thing for it to be Y/N L/N, a thing that had unrivalled instincts that she’d honed to the breaking point.

Reiner watched the two females closely, marking them carefully. He noted that where Annie shone with insanity as though it were her one saving grace, the princess practically glowed with it. Even the forest seemed to hold its breath as she set a sigh loose and dove to the ground, her movements calculated and smooth; in the space of a single second, she was behind a bare oak tree that was previously five meters away from her original hiding place.

Annie swore softly as she realized that her companion was no longer behind her. “Have you seen them?”

Reiner felt Orion tense. In the emptiness of the surrounding woods, the words felt as loud as a shout. But the beast with the twin daggers just snarled in displeasure and bared her teeth at the other girl. “If I’d seen them, do you really think that I’d still be here, Annie?”

Her voice dripped with sarcasm, and Reiner watched Annie swallow before she smiled. “No, I suppose not, Princess.”

The Princess looked nothing like her title suggested - she was dirty, and there was no golden crown on her head, and she was currently running her tongue along the tips of her teeth as though she could taste something particularly satisfying. She was wearing leather boots and her clothes were all black - no traces of gowns and jewels besides the ones in her daggers.

And a black cloak was tied around her neck, the broach showing a wicked symbol engraved within a silver ring. It didn't exactly match a black tattoo that marred the skin on her collarbone, but the two symbols were near enough in their threatening message that it didn't seem to matter.

And Reiner knew that, whilst Y/N looked nothing like a princess, royalty echoed in her essence.

The royalty in question stretched her muscles as though they were sore and stood up, the cloak
flowing in the bitter wind that whipped its way through the trees. “You know that we shouldn't be doing this,” Annie carefully stated, as though she knew that she was treading on very thin ice. It seemed that this particular argument had been waged before, as the Princess’ stature tensed in an unspoken warning. “Your uncle stated that the hunt was for the males alone.”

The Princess snarled. “I don't care. If I want to join the hunt, then I shall. No one will stop me; not if they want to keep their heads.”

“What's your plan?” Annie insisted, as they started lightly treading through the frosty wasteland. Orion nudged Reiner’s side slightly, and both males started slowly, ever so slowly, following them.

“I want to find the little hunting party, who think they're too good for me, and teach them a lesson where my uncle and mother aren't in a position to stop me.”

Reiner repressed the shiver that crawled up his spine at the uncaring, lovely voice. All knew that their princess would bestow death on those that displeased her, because their princess was a true titan in every sense of the world.

Not that it had been easy to get to this point.

It had taken so long for Reiner to mask the jealousy that he practically radiated every time Annie Leonhardt appeared in Y/N L/N’s shadow. Annie had gotten her back – not him, not Bertoldt. Annie. It hadn’t been just someone to retrieve the girl - it had been her who had gifted her people with Y/N L/N, the titan Princess. It hadn’t mattered that he or Bertoldt had been right there with Annie, marking and protecting their princess as they saw fit.

No.

Annie had claimed all of that fame and had reaped the rewards.

Over the year, Annie had grown as a beast, stripping away that human skin that they'd all been forced to wear in order to gain the Princess's trust. She'd been the daughter of a titan with medicinal skills, a young girl without any particular skills except her sheer stubbornness to learn. All she'd had was a sword and a name, and so she had made it count. Her name belonged to the First Family, the bloodline of titans that were tasked with the protection of the Royal Family. She was born to protect the royalty, the princess that had been born merely months after her.

But now she was the Princess's right hand, her personal protector. The honour had been earned, the Queen had said, due to her finding the Princess in the wide world of humans. Wherever Y/N was, Annie was always at her side gripping her bow or an axe.

And oh, Reiner hated it.

His name hadn’t belonged to the First Family – and so he hadn’t been recognised in the slightest. He and Bertoldt had been cast into the shadows, like they’d always done, and watched as their efforts were claimed by something with more power – until Orion had recognised that they were not things to be overlooked.

Following the train of his thoughts, Reiner glanced at Orion – only to find the male slipping away, his intent obviously directing back towards where they’d left the hunting team to figure out tracks whilst they waited for the princess to appear – as both had known she would. One of the lesser titans had finally found solid tracks – tracks that had been following the titans for a year, forcing them to move from place to place, not resting at a single establishment for too long. But each time they set up somewhere new, the tracks had followed them. Reiner had seen them himself – slightly
messed up and teased. He knew that the tracks had been placed there deliberately, to make the titans on edge, to make them uneasy. The humans that dogged them knew how to irritate his kind.

So, Reiner didn’t breathe a single word of complaint as he and Orion stole back away to re-join their hunting party. They both knew that between Annie and Y/N, they’d be joined soon enough.

And so, they left the two girls sneaking quietly through the forest, tracking the few footprints left by a few of the newer hunting members on a cold and bitter winter's day.

*

The knocking on her door was steadily driving her into insanity.

“What is it?!?” The girl suddenly screamed, deciding that pretending she was asleep was useless at this point. Her bed creaked as she flew into a sitting position and grabbed the rapier from where it was propped against her bedside table. Her untamed red hair danced about her pale face and she impatiently brushed it out her way, taking the two leather strips from her wrist and wrapping her hair hastily into two pigtails at each side of her face.

Her door opened as she stood up, her blue shorts and vest offering modest covering as the blankets fell away from her body. She crossed her arms as she beheld the people waiting outside her door, a leather bracelet and charm swinging from her wrist.

“You’d better have a good reason for getting me up.”

A girl with wide hazel eyes looked at her with an exasperated sigh, her brown hair neatly pulled back into a ponytail. A light dusting of freckles reigned over her face as she attempted to smile at her crabby, rapier-wielding friend in a peace offering. “It’s midnight,” the brown-haired girl said, shrugging her shoulders. “You have to come, Isabel.”

Isabel shrugged on a jacket and a long cloak, sheathing her rapier but buckled it to her waist. Her green eyes glittered with malice as she dared any of the people behind the door to say anything about her outfit choice. She cast one look behind her, to see the letter on her desk.

‘Dear Isabel Magnolia,
This is your reminder that the weekly practice on Friday at midnight will still be in order. To refresh your memory, here is what you have to do:
1) Find the subject
2) Figure out what killed the subject
3) Figure out who killed the subject or suffer the consequences.
Sincerely,
Survey Corps, Assassination Academy’

Isabel bit her lip as she stepped out from her room and joined the people on the outside, hearing other people rush down the corridor in order to get out and find the body first. “I told you that I didn’t want to play the game today, Sasha.”

“We ignored that,” Sasha grinned, and the two girls at her side smiled gingerly. They almost seemed like complete opposites; one was tall and dark-haired, and looked like smiling was never on the agenda. The other was small and dainty, with wide blue eyes and blond hair that shone as bright as her smile.

“I don't want to go,” Isabel said, and slammed the door.

She lasted five seconds before she threw it open again and stormed out, the three girls following
her with silent smiles. They knew how she felt about this game; they knew that she had long since
taken over the role of Pride, a role that had been ripped from them. Isabel wore it well, her new
title. There was something more grounded about Isabel than there had been with Y/N, the original
owner of the title of Pride. There was less of the instability that Y/N had just carried with her, as
naturally as she breathed.

Isabel was steadfast, a rock that never caved or cracked. Y/N had been brilliancy, a flame that was
forever dancing and flickering.

And god, did Isabel miss her.

There was not a day in the months that had passed that Isabel Magnolia did not think about her best
friend. About how Y/N had stepped onto the titan terrain, planning on never coming back. About
how she had never gotten to wear the blue ties that her other friends now all wore. She’d allowed
her friend to sacrifice herself simply because the others in power had voted to - Y/N would have
never let that happen to her. Y/N would have gotten her out, damning the consequences. It was
funny, Isabel thought, to think about how panicked she had been in the face of a fight. Y/N had
never been like that.

“We know what playing this game means to you; we knew that you’d want to skip it, like you
always do,” the blond girl, Christa, murmured as they made their way out of the Dorms. “But
Sasha thought it would be better this way.”

“Because this way, you don’t get to wallow,” Sasha finished, winking roguishly at Isabel. Isabel
rolled her eyes and allowed Sasha to sling an arm around her shoulders, the large double doors
being tugged open by Ymir, the dark to Christa's light. Isabel breathed in the cool, midnight air and
felt her body starting to relax back into a normal routine, a repeatable game.

A game of murder.

* 

Erwin Smith slammed a hand down onto his desk, sending numerous pieces of paper flying. The
brown-haired woman, seated on the opposite side of the desk, yelped in shock and leaped to her
feet. Erwin didn't care about that, however, as he considered the excitement coursing through his
veins.

“What I even ask what the heck you're doing, or are you just going to keep it to yourself?”

The burly built man raised his blue eyes to meet the hazel ones of his captain's, and he grinned a
wolf's grin at her. Hanji merely sighed in exasperation before returning to her seat and slumping
into it, watching him carefully as he considered his next move.

“Fetch him,” he said, his voice trembling with endless possibilities. Hanji said nothing, however,
as she rose to her feet again and went quietly out of his office. Erwin again scanned the letter on
the desk before him, the tiny writing creating such a thunderous sense of excitement within him.

It had only been a few months since he had allowed the titans to regroup instead of following and
exterminating them. He had been wrong to take pity on his soldiers, or on the students. He'd
thought that they'd been traumatized enough, after the attack on the city and then the battle on the
field so far from anyone's home. He'd given them a few months to regroup, to train the skills that
they'd now realized were vital.

And in those few months, he'd lost the titans. They'd slipped from his fingers into thin air, it would
seem. So now he was desperately trying to find them, sending out scouts and soldiers alike to try and bait them into attacking. But it was worthless; they were nowhere to be found. He'd lost the chance that Y/N had given to him on a silver platter - had wasted it on pity and stupid nothings.

But this letter changed that.

The door slammed open and Levi Ackerman stormed in, his face pulled into a frown and his eyes glimmering with panic. Erwin did not wince as he too slammed his hands down on Erwin's desk, the short male staring at him with wide eyes and a snarl.

It did not take Levi long to glance down at the letter and realize what it meant to Erwin. Erwin watched in fascination as the grey eyes seemingly faded and knew that Levi was watching a different scene than the one that was in front of him.

Levi slowly came back to this world, his lips trembling and his hands shaking from where they were planted on his desk.

“Where is she?”
There were moments where Annie doubted all that she’d done.

She, of all things, knew without a doubt that her Princess was every inch a monster – and perhaps that fact shouldn’t have thrilled her as much as it did. She could still feel the stickiness of the blood, the glow of the stars on the knife she’d used, the silence that had stretched for hours afterwards.

But even though Annie Leonhardt had every bit of proof that was ever going to exist, she still marvelled at her own ability to doubt.

It was striking at her attention more times today than usual – boring into her eyes that she was reading too much into things. Her pulse whispered it again and again – not right. Y/N L/N was not right.

Annie watched as her Princess sneered, gripping her daggers more tightly. The amber handles gleamed in the dying light, the black and white stones winking at both girls as if to mock them – to mock the thoughts that had Belua pulling faces in a wordless conversation with herself.

“Princess?” Annie murmured, trying hard not to break the silence that Belua had found comfortable – but needing to tug her back.

“Shut up, Annie.” Annie supposed that she deserved the snarl, the Princess obviously more than a little peeved at the thought of Annie catching her wrapped up in herself and her thoughts. “They’re close. You can almost hear them.”

Blowing out a breath and watching it turn to mist, Annie didn’t bother with a nod of affirmation. “How close?”

The Princess grinned in such a way that it sent a shiver down Annie’s spine, and her E/C fastened on something a few meters away. Following her line of thought, Annie joined her in surveying the footprint that pointed down the hill that they were both on. They’d been tracking the group for a while now – and it seemed that they were about to catch up fairly quickly. Just down the hill, Annie could see a little cluster of people wearing black cloaks as they formed themselves into a circle, most likely discussing where they were going to attack. Belua blew out a breath - her court was waiting for her.

“Very close.”

With that, Belua started running down the hill with her own cloak flying behind her like a shadow of its own. Annie, by her own wits or simply the months of knowing the girl, had expected the sudden take off – her own footsteps were light and soundless as she followed Belua down, the band of titans inching closer and closer as they both rushed to meet them. Annie palmed her axe, knowing that Belua’s daggers were still in her palms as she leaped those final few meters, the hunting party only just turning in surprise as suddenly, a wraith leapt into their midst.

Annie made quick work of grabbing one of the younger titans – the weaker stature, the more faded black of the cloak signalling that they were of lower rank. She didn’t have anything to prove – not like the Princess, who had to prove that she was worthy with every blink.
She’d wrapped an arm around one of them in the space of a few seconds, pressing the black-jewelled dagger tightly to his throat. His gasp of anger was silenced even further as she brutally kicked the back of his right knee so that he fell into the snow. Annie watched in rapture as Belua’s other arm whipped out and threw the other dagger so that its blade went straight through another titan’s collar and pinned them to the tree behind them, slicing a thin cut along their throat as it landed.

Annie didn’t blame the hunting party as they scuttled away from them, only leaving three standing undaunted and proud in front of Belua. Annie groaned nonetheless, letting go of the titan she’d grabbed onto and lightly stepped to Belua’s side. “When you said that you’d teach them a lesson, I thought you meant verbally.”

Belua ran her tongue over the edges of her teeth, her eyes looking down at the thing whose head she gripped in her arms – missing the simmering look of wanting that Orion practically projected at her movement. Annie, however, did not – a bolt of jealousy coursed its way through her, as damning as a curse. She couldn’t do anything about it – not as Belua grinned fiercely at him as he stepped forward, drawing the Princess’ attention back to him. “Alright, Princess. You’ve made your point.”

He drew his hood back to reveal those attractive features arranged into a lovely expression of irritation. His dark brown curls had grown longer throughout the months that Annie had spent with him, so much so that he had now tied it back into a little ponytail so that the rugged locks would not bother him. His face was leaned and tanned, and his lips were slightly crooked as he grinned at Belua. Annie had to wonder at Belua’s oblivious nature; did the Princess simply not see the simmering lust that seethed in her mate’s eyes, or did she just want to punish him for it by ignoring him?

“They lesson didn’t take as long as I thought it would; I had to resort to other measures,” Belua pouted, before dumping the titan in her arms so that he wheezed on the ground alongside the one Annie had dropped earlier. The Princess idly cleaned a dagger on her cloak as she sauntered over to Orion and stuck her tongue out at him.

“The fact you thought it would take a shorter amount of time is faintly worrying,” Reiner said, his tone placating. It was now Annie’s turn to roll her eyes at the tall, blond haired titan as he stepped closer to Orion – a useless display of allegiance. Annie raised her eyebrows pointedly at Belua, stepping just behind Reiner and monitoring his every move. Although Annie had spent the entirety of her life with Reiner and Bertoldt, she didn’t have the capacity to trust anyone when it came to Belua – especially when they had demonstrated that their personal allegiance was towards Orion in the stead of their true Princess.

Belua dismissed Annie with a slight glance of utter disdain as she sweetly met the gaze of Reiner. “I thought that I may have had to start beheading your little minions before Orion would have let me join this hunt,” the Princess said, then meeting Orion’s brown eyes with a glare. “But I think that it won’t have to come to that...” The rest of the titans within the party all began vigorously nodding, and Annie couldn’t help smiling at their will to live. “You’re going to let us hunt. You’ve been lost for a while now.”

“Disorientated is not the same thing as lost,” Reiner grumbled as he began following Belua’s arrogant stride in the opposite direction to which they’d been headed. Annie grinned at him as snow crunched beneath her boots and the cool air chilled her slightly damp forehead. This was freedom. This was Annie’s world, following her leader wherever she so desired.

“I assume that you don't want me to tell the Queen about this,” Orion softly said, each one of his
lengthy steps matching two of Belua’s – and Annie watched as the Princess’s mouth began to tighten in irritation.

“Unless you want to wake up without eyeballs, yes,” she stated. “I couldn't stand to be trapped in that manor house for a second longer.”

“Princesses do not just join hunting parties,” Orion gritted his teeth in annoyance. “They're meant to be working on more pressing things - like what dress to wear, and which human to eat for dinner –”

He didn't manage to finish his sentence before another titan had scrambled up to hand Belua the other dagger that she'd thrown earlier. She pinched the blade and eyed the silver wink of the metal, before looking slowly over at Orion. “Finish that sentence and I finish you.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

Annie winced at the barked laugh that erupted from Belua’s lips at the coy reply – and she promptly elbowed Reiner pointedly in the stomach as soon as she spotted him shooting a grin to Bertoldt.

Orion, despite his witty comment, didn’t look away from the daggers that Belua sheathed smoothly at her hips. “And it goes without saying that it would be especially cruel – to murder me with the very knives that you won from my own mother.”

Belua laughed quietly – and whilst it did nothing to Orion’s perfect mask, Annie saw how Bertoldt stiffened and shot a wary glance to Reiner at the sound. “You forget that I am cruelty, and suffering, and death.”

“And arrogant,” Orion added, earning a barked laugh from Reiner and a low hiss from Annie. He waved an insolent hand behind him at the latter as he continued. “Kill me, and you'd face all sorts of consequences.”

Belua tutted. “Careful - I might think that those words were a threat. We wouldn't want that, now, would we?”

Annie overtook the Princess as the pair fell back, bickering. She led the party to a clearing at the side of the hill – always keeping half of her mind behind her, where the two exchanged variously creative threats. With a well-practised eye, she scanned the area and grinned as she spotted the still-hot embers of a fire that had been hastily put out. Both Orion and Belua quietened and watched as she spat at it, and the sizzle of the liquid as it hit the red heat of the logs broke the satisfied silence of those who were following.

Turning to the direction of broken twigs, Annie glanced over to the branches that practically screamed where the human had fled to.

“Let's fetch a human, shall we?” Belua crooned softly, patting Annie on the shoulder as she passed her to take the lead. Annie didn’t mind; indeed, when she could already feel the excitement of the beasts at her back become electric, she found that she did not mind at all.

Her doubts pushed to the back of her mind, Annie Leonhardt followed the beast that she loved, preparing to kill.

***

Isabel Magnolia looked again at the body that lay in the broom's closet on the second floor of the
school. The teacher had lasted longer than most; he had been on his fourth week. But now his face was grey and blank, death stilling all of his features. Isabel avoided breathing through her nose, the putrid smell of dampness almost making her gag.

Her teammates were arguing over various causes of death in hushed voices, knowing that any moment, another team could come around the corner and claim their findings. Christa and Ymir had taken their posts at the edge of the corridor, watching for any such people. The petite blond girl couldn't often stand to see the body of the teachers that the murderers left behind, and Ymir was more than happy to keep her company as Christa took over the role of the watcher.

Ordinarily, the two didn’t fall in with the main team too often – Christa very often couldn’t bear the sight of bodies anyway. It was no small wonder that she refused to attend classes taught by the criminal teachers – and had managed to charm her way around Pixis’s rules. No one was quite sure how, exactly, she’d gotten the headteacher to agree – although Jean had once bet Marco his entire dessert that Ymir had been dragged in at some point and used to threaten him.

Of course, it hadn’t helped that Connie had promptly stolen the dessert from Jean anyway.

Connie was knelt right beside the body of the male, currently holding up the man’s hand and was using it to wave enthusiastically at Isabel. Had it been another night, Isabel might have had to fight off laughter – but as it was, she was not in the mood. He caught onto her glower, and Isabel watched as he dropped the limp hand – but not before using it to flip the middle finger at Jean. The raucous boy, unlike Isabel, did laugh.

Sasha, surprisingly, seemed to be the only one actually attempting some sort of work. In the past couple of months, she’d spent a lot of her time with Christa learning all that she could about the girl’s specialty – plants, herbs and poisons. Whilst Isabel harboured a sneaking, amusing suspicion that her friend had only learnt about the topic purely to know about which plants were entirely safe to eat in the grounds, she couldn’t deny that it had been helpful.

Just not particularly in this case – Christa had taken one smell of the air and had proclaimed that plants had entirely no part to play in this death and vacated the immediate area, looking a peculiar shade of green. Sasha had stubbornly insisted on inspecting him for poison, though.

To no one’s surprise, Jean and Marco were doing nothing except standing at Isabel’s side in stony silence, occasionally murmuring to each other. Isabel liked to believe that they knew how hard she was thinking and knew that if they wanted to stay alive then they'd stay out of her way.

In reality, she was half certain that Jean was now falling asleep on Marco’s shoulder without a single care in the world.

“I’ve ruled out ingestion of poison,” Sasha announced, a flush on her cheeks informing Isabel that the girl was earnest.

“Sasha, we’ve already ruled out plants and ingestion anyway,” Marco said, moving his body so that Jean didn’t drool on him.

Isabel nodded in agreement, looking at her old teacher’s shoes. “He was drowned, obviously.”

“Oh, obviously?” Sasha pouted, crossing her arms – and would have made a cute picture, had she not have been knelted next to a dead teacher.

“The smell, the bloating of his joints, the fact that his hair was obviously towel-dried –“

Sasha threw up her hands and stuck her tongue out. “Alright! Don’t add to the list of my
incompetence!"

Isabel helped the girl to stand, and then started a slow circle around the body, continuing her observations. “The student got rid of his wet clothes and dressed him in clean ones from the laundry - those trousers do not fit, so they don't belong to him. That was probably a diversion; they didn't take into account that his lips are blue, or that the smell of water is on him. That means they've got to be young - not really experienced.”

“We're looking for a first year then, since we only really covered drowning in our first term of our second year,” summarized Marco. “And a boy, at that.”

“Why a boy?” Isabel asked curtly, and then felt abashed at Marco's raised eyebrow. She couldn't help it - she just wasn't as good as this game as the original Pride had been.

Marco’s brow creased. “If they dressed the teacher in clothing for men, they clearly got the laundry from the boy's dormitory. Girls aren't allowed in the boy's dorm.”

Connie snorted. “That doesn’t stop them from going in there, though.” He high fived Sasha, who face-palmed with her other hand. No one brought up the fact that their crew had often broken into the oppositely gendered rooms so that they could have sleepovers.

“I don’t think we even know where your laundry is stored, though,” Isabel speculated. “You really think a first-year girl would be happy about not only breaking the rules, but sneaking around in the boy’s laundry drawers?”

“Not to mention that there are female Class C teachers,” Ymir distantly added from the doorway. “A girl would have probably murdered one of them for the ease.”

Isabel nodded, bringing her hand sharply upwards and knocking Jean upside the head. Amidst his spluttering after being awoken so sharply, she leaned around Marco to see Connie. “I don’t suppose you know of any first-year boys who like boating and swimming, do you? Most first years would attempt murder using a technique they were at least able in.”

“There was a boy who got told off by our dorm master for coming back with wet clothes,” Connie shrugged, not quite seeing how Isabel and Sasha suddenly traded a narrow-eyed glance. “I'm guessing that he's the obvious choice.”

Sasha sighed as she leaned close to Connie. “If that kid is actually who did this, then he was a fool.”

“Do you relate?”

Isabel was already turning away from the pair, handing the phone over to Marco so that he could make the call – not quite missing the sound of Sasha punching Connie in the arm, though. “The weapon was the lake, then, I guess.”

“Sounds stupid,” Sasha agreed, but the two girls stood to one side as Connie and Marco walked a little way off to make the call. Isabel smiled at her team as she now also fought the battle of keeping her eyes open. Jean sniggered as she yawned widely, ruffling her hair. The horseshoe charm that hung from his bracelet lightly danced against her forehead, and she brushed him off abruptly as she started walking back to the main body of the school. She could feel her teammate's confusion at her unwillingness to be her normal, happier self, but she knew well enough that they were aware of the reason behind it.

“I know why you're upset,” Christa said, following her. Isabel didn’t quite bother to look around –
she knew well enough that if the small girl was following, that meant Ymir and Sasha would probably be bidding goodnight to the boys.

Isabel took a breath. “It’s just – she could have guessed all of that within ten seconds, you know?”

“Probably.”

“And it’s stupid, to miss her most during these games. I miss her all of the time, of course – but these games are where I feel it the most.”

Isabel didn’t look around for Christa, didn’t dare read what was written in those eyes. The girl hadn’t been there in those moments when Y/N had given herself up – had been safely at school, wondering why the second and third years had suddenly been called out of the school to aid the scouts. Isabel wondered, sometimes, if it was alright to hate the beautiful girl for it – if it was alright to harbour such jealousy over that single day. Christa hadn’t seen the titans in action; hadn’t seen the way that some of her seniors had rode horses onto that battlefield and hadn’t come back.

“So do you ever think about a bigger plan?” In response, Isabel’s body stopped without her telling it to. Christa, however, kept walking – she was now ahead, the faint moonlight gleaming on her hair. “Y/N had a bigger plan, all along. All you have, right now, is a plan that you don’t know how to execute and goals you don’t know how to achieve. And I think you’re only now realizing that, and that’s why you’re so scared that she isn’t here.”

“What –“

“Don’t tell me that you know what you’re doing, Iz. You’re just here, playing a game that’s easy to fall into, playing into a schedule that’s easy to follow. You wander around with dead eyes, thinking about something you’ve lost, and saying you’re going to get it back – but you don’t use the time you have right now in order to make that happen.”

Isabel swallowed the bile that rose in response to the small girl’s words. “And I suppose you have a bigger plan?”

“To make sure that no one has to hurt any more than they have to.”

Isabel laughed, and she’d never heard a sound so hollow. Christa heaved open the door to the girl’s dormitories, halls barely full of students rushing around to find the body. Most of them had probably assumed that it was outside; there were more places to hide it outside, with the wide area that Survey Corps owned. “You’re hurting, Iz, and I want to help you – I really do. But I can’t – not when you’re doing nothing to help yourself, you know?”

It was common knowledge that anyone who bore the full weight of Christa Lenz’s blue eyes entirely on the recipient’s would make anyone lose the ability to talk properly for a few minutes after – and Isabel truly understood it now, as she watched that small creature slip inside and climb up the staircase, a sad smile on her face. Ymir lightly brushed past Isabel, widening her steps until she caught up with Christa as they both reached the corridor and disappeared from sight. Isabel felt Sasha at her back – but before either girl could muster talking, Isabel dashed off.

She finally reached her bedroom and swung it closed behind her before locking it securely, simultaneously hoping that Sasha would or would not knock. Telling herself that she was being silly, Isabel merely tested the lock - just to make sure. She had never been one to not learn from other people’s mistakes.

She dumped herself into her chair, swivelling it around to her desk – the bell ringing sharply to
alert everyone that the game, for tonight, was over. She unfastened the cloak from her shoulders and unbuckled the rapiers from her sides, before brushing her hair loose from its ponytails.

Isabel had never given much thought to Christa Lenz – only that Y/N had recognised the girl’s worth, long ago, and had undisputedly accepted her as a friend. The rest of them had been a mixture of amused and annoyed – the boys had been pleased that they had an excuse to see the prettiness of Christa, whilst the girls questioned whether dealing with the constant mood of Ymir was worth it.

Now, she supposed, it had become clear to her that perhaps Y/N just had a talent for connecting with the right people.

Isabel felt herself slipping away into her thoughts, the slow warmth of her room soothing her enough that she slumped into the chair fully, her eyes level with the desk.

The desk.

Isabel Magnolia was not a tidy person, and so the sight of the messy and wild desk was of no shock to her. The numerous sketches and pictures of her friends were tacked up on the walls, and a few – only a dangerous few – notes from her classes had been half-heartedly copied and attempted to be learnt.

But nevertheless, the sight of an envelope sitting on the top of the pile of pencil shavings that she’d left there would be enough to jar anybody. Letters that came to those at Assassination Academy were rare – unless you counted the letters delivered every Friday to inform you of whether you were going to be a murderer, and Isabel did not in the least count those.

Most attending were orphans, herself included. So, whilst some received letters from the office from their parents, wondering about whether their children were even alive, Isabel had not been among those.

Isabel had seen her desk upon leaving – there had been no envelope. And an envelope with a stamp on the right side as big as a coin, she was hardly going to miss.

Tiredness forgotten in the wake of her thundering veins, Isabel grabbed the letter and practically flung herself towards the window – where a pool of moonlight was waiting. Her eyes devoured the sight of her name written on it with a displeased hand – just her name. No address.

Her excitement dimmed – it was not from her. Isabel knew the way that she wrote – the handwriting for the ‘I’ of her name wasn’t right. But she looked at the green ink that made up the stamp on the side, and her gaze widened.

The red-haired girl looked down at her wrist, where a bird still swung from her bracelet, and then back at the stamp.

It was an exact copy of the sparrow.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys!!!
I am SO SORRY for the delay - I have a few good excuses though! A few of you
might remember that I was doing my A-levels a few months ago? I managed to get good enough grades to get into University (Exeter, just in case you were curious!) so I've just been completely busy with packing and reading and settling in. My course is English - and I'm taking a creative writing course module, so I'm sooooo interested to see what they teach me.

Thank you so much for sticking with me, for commenting, I'll reply to each of them soon!

~Ria
Her breathing became erratic – desperate, disjointed, in complete disarray.

Still, Isabel flew to the Headmaster’s office on swift wings, her heartbeat echoing in her mind. The darkness of the corridor did nothing to halt her running – even if her legs were shaking badly enough to cause her to stumble more than one.

She wouldn’t stop running until she reached that damning room at the end – hadn’t stopped running since she’d started, practically falling out of her room the moment that she’d opened that letter – the letter now crumpled into her fist.

The double doors were suddenly inches from her face – Isabel would have run into them were it not for the hand that had abruptly grabbed at her shoulder.

She didn’t turn around – she should have known that Sasha would have followed her, would have been following her from the moment that Isabel had cried out upon reading the letter. Sasha wouldn’t have cared that Isabel had blatantly ignored her – the stoic girl would have done what she always would have – not complained and just taken off right after her friends.

Isabel nodded to the girl – a thank you or a farewell, she wasn’t sure – and kicked open the heavy doors, ignoring the bite of pain at her foot as she beheld the room beyond.

Feeling a great weight pressing on her chest even as she left her companion behind to keep watch, Isabel stepped into the room – trying not to gag at the smell of alcohol. The fire cackled at her lowly in its grate, the dim level of light flickering around the room. Lights bounced off the bottles and mirrors that Pixis kept around his room; Isabel scrunched her nose up in disgust as she considered what was in those bottles – the source of the smell, undoubtedly. The mirrors, she understood - every assassin understood the uses and weaknesses for using mirrors.

Pixis was just another assassin, dressed in a pretty role and doused in drink.

It didn’t make him any less deadly – Isabel supposed that it only made him more so.

But he didn’t look that way at precisely that moment – much less a fearsome war leader and more of a drunken uncle, sprawled in the great armchair by that stupid, leering fire. Isabel scowled at the flames before directing that same scowl to her grinning headmaster, walking steadily closer until she came to a stop in front of him. “Miss Magnolia. How may I help you this fine evening?”

Isabel bit back the retort that it was much less evening and more very, very early in the morning. Instead she forced herself to swallow, floundering for the right words. “I – I found a letter after my team caused the game to finish –“

“It was very well played,” Pixis acknowledged, inclining his head. “In fact, I cannot remember a time where your team didn’t guess it.”

He was wrong – there were numerous times where other teams beat their makeshift team to the criminal’s body. But Isabel was not about to correct him – whether due to her own pride or due to her trepidation at the smell of his breath, she didn’t bother to think. “My team are strong.”

“Of course – all specializing in something different, am I correct?”

Isabel rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t matter.”
“Not yet. Only second years, and so strong. Cherish this time, Miss Magnolia. You haven’t got long until you have to make your choice.”

It was common knowledge that after the three years of training, a student could choose between the three mainstream careers – guarding the walls, guarding the King, or becoming a scout. Isabel didn’t know why Pixis was bothering to bring it up now.

“I’m not here to talk about my future in a couple of years,” Isabel said, watching as Pixis huffed a laugh.

“No. You’re here to beg for my assistance.”

Isabel fought the flush of shame off – refusing to allow her cheeks to redden. “Yes, I suppose that I am.”

Pixis’s eyes sparkled – in anger, amusement, Isabel couldn’t tell. But she refused to shrink from his stare as those grey eyes went to the letter she was gripping tightly in her fist. “I know who that letter is from – I can’t say that I’m surprised.”

Isabel’s throat tightened, and she dodged the weight of his stare as she looked into the fire. “And I can’t say that I’m surprised that you’ve read the letter already.”

There was a pause. Isabel only wished it wasn’t as sharp as her rapier.

Pixis broke it first, but it only took a few words for Isabel to regret that fact. “Ah, youth. You must be quite stupid to not be afraid to pick a fight with me, Miss Magnolia.”

Isabel lifted her eyes from the fire to meet his stare – but flinched away, once again. The sheer dominance in her headmaster’s gaze was like a slap to the face – that hardened stare spoke not of a mere alcoholic streak, but instead of wars and soldiers and blood. “You say stupid – I prefer the term desperate, myself.”

“Are you trying to get me to risk the lives of my students simply because you are desperate?”

There it was – the flush to her face, the feeling like she’d just been punched in the gut. Isabel barely registered the sound of the double doors opening before Pixis tutted. “Get out – I barely tolerated you standing guard of the door, and I won’t stand for you backing this selfishness.”

“With all due respect, Sir,” Sasha said, coming to stand at Isabel’s side, “I don’t care. You need to listen to her.”

“I should put you both into detention for two months with Shadis for this – this ridiculousness.”

“Did you not understand the letter?” Isabel couldn’t just stand there, simmering in shame. She squared her shoulders. “Do you not know who it’s from, and what it means?”

Pixis leaned back into his chair, sighing as he looked into the embers left behind by the dying fire. Isabel understood the gesture for what it was – understood that both she and Sasha were now dancing on the edge of the blade, and it would only take a mere slip to fall into a deadly situation. “This letter – it’s from Levi Ackerman.” Isabel felt Sasha straighten in intrigue, but Pixis remained motionless – the man had probably already known that. Had known from his handwriting – as she had done. She ignored the dull ache of pain that thinking about her brother brought. Later. She’d focus on that later. “It’s clearly an instruction, he’s asking us for help.”

“It seems that he’s asking you for help – not me,” Pixis interrupted idly, his eyes still fastened on
the embers, “I did not get a letter, you see.”

“But you did,” Isabel said. “You got a letter to me, opened it and read it. Levi would have known that a letter like this would have been read – he would have known that you would have seen it. He only sent one, because –“ Isabel came to the realization the moment that she said it – “because sending two would have been suspicious. Whatever the Survey Corps are doing, they don’t want people to know about it. And just one letter, addressed to a mere second-year girl? It means nothing to spies from the outside. It’s useless. But Levi knew that it would have been searched by the officials of the school – he wanted you to have this message as much as he wanted me to.”

Pixis’s mouth tugged upwards at the corners, but the coldness of his eyes stayed the same.

“Clever.”

“You can’t simply ignore this message, sir,” Isabel said. “It’s clear, brutal and obvious what he wants.”

“And what is it, Magnolia, that he wants?”

The question brought her up short, enough so that she chanced a glance back at where Sasha was – a movement she regretted, for the girl was just in the process of sneaking a snack into her mouth. Sasha shrugged unapologetically, eyeing their headmaster warily. “Are you being serious? It’s obvious what he wants; to destroy –“

“It is obvious what Levi Ackerman wants,” Pixis interrupted, his patience apparently at an end. He heaved himself into a standing position and walked around the two girls as if they were nothing but statues, going to stand at his window. “And whilst he’s doing a mighty good job convincing everyone else that he wants nothing more than to be Humanity’s Strongest, to destroy all traces of titans, he is not going to fool me. And neither of you possess the skill to do so either.”

Sasha narrowed her eyes. “We don’t possess the skill to get you to do the right thing?”

“No, you don’t have the skill to do that either.”

“If Levi doesn’t want to be Humanity’s Strongest, what else does he want, then?” Sasha asked, stepping a bit closer to Isabel. Isabel looked down at the carpet, surprisingly clean from clutter and crumbs.

“Apparently, the same thing that anyone with common sense wants nowadays. Think about it, Miss Braus. Levi Ackerman - well known second in the scouts, named Humanity’s Strongest since he’s been in action - sends his adopted sister a letter. Isabel Magnolia - brilliant tactician, well-loved among her peers, skilled archer and horse rider. What links them, other than their family ties?”

Sasha shifted uneasily, but Isabel waited. She knew perfectly well what was coming.

“Y/N L/N, the number one student within Survey Corps, natural leader, perhaps the most coveted fighter in these lands. The two people that she loved most in this world - Isabel Magnolia, the girl who brought her into a civilized world, a safer world than the one she had suffered through. And, of course, the famous Levi Ackerman, the man who told her that he was in love with her.”

“How do you know about that?” Isabel snapped.

“He told her in the dungeons - perhaps not the best place for it, I’d imagine - but sound carries. A student that was being held there, by the name of Gustav, overheard and it didn’t take very much persuasion at all for him to tell us.”
Isabel grabbed Sasha’s hand and tugged her towards Pixis, still standing at the window. They couldn’t see much, but the pitch black of the grounds alternatively soothed and threatened Isabel. “And what about Y/N L/N? He may want to get her back – but that doesn’t stop the fact that getting her back and eradicating titans can’t be done at the same time.”

“Levi sent this letter – not Erwin Smith. As such, I technically do not have to do anything. It is clear that Levi is acting on his own, to get back the girl he loved.”

Isabel shoved all sense of revulsion and nervousness deep into her gut and rolled her shoulders back. “And what if you’re wrong? Why go through such extensive measures to get a letter through the system if it were merely the whim of a man in delusional love? You know that’s rubbish, sir. Erwin knows any letter he sends is an immediate red light – but that of his second? Not so much a threat, especially not to his sister.”

Pixis smiled; Isabel could only see it because of the pale reflection on the window. “And what, exactly, would you have me do?”

Isabel cursed everything to hell as she stalked to Pixis’s own desk and sat herself down in his seat. It was almost worth it to see Sasha’s eyes bulge in delirious awe – but the simmering emotion in Pixis’s stature told her that after her act of confidence was over, she’d be serving detention for the entire year. But she ignored that, for now, as she leant forwards to plant her elbows on his desk and peer at her headmaster over her joined fingertips.

“I’ll tell you exactly what I’ll have you do – and even though you’re not going to like it, you’re going to do it.”

And deep down, the letter she’d stuffed into her pocket burned in her mind’s eye. It had been brutally short – only a handful of words.

‘Get ready, brat.’

Then, his signature.

Then, coordinates.

Isabel Magnolia knew exactly where they led – and didn’t care if it played right into Pixis’s expectations of her motives. Even as she watched Pixis smirk to himself as he settled in to play her game, she revelled in knowing one more thing.

She felt good.

***

Annie knew that Belua was feeling good.

She knew by the way that the girl tore and shredded her way through the undergrowth, thorns and branches doing nothing to stop the huntress from seizing her quarry. She knew by the way that her breathing was even and clear, from the way that her stamina showed no signs of waning.

The Princess had a body in its prime, muscles that were toned and defined, hands that were well suited to fighting.

“Sometimes, Annie dearest, I wonder why you really let her stay in that human dump for a year.”

At the sound of Orion’s voice, Annie couldn’t help but stiffen. His voice was low – whether due to
a slight lack of breath from the sprint they’d all just done, or due to the fact he didn’t want his
Princess to know what he was saying, Annie didn’t know. All that she did know was that she did
not like it when his voice was low.

A low voice meant danger – it meant promises and threats and confessions, and all too often, all
three. Annie would have scoffed at the idea – but she had too many enemies, even at her home. So,
instead of scoffing, she allowed her eyes to scald him with freezing fire as she answered him – in
that same, low voice. “You know why we did – the Princess was exactly where we needed her to
be. She was learning about humans, getting a first-hand experience on how to gain their trust; she
was gaining a foothold with all the major war threats in a couple of years. Why would we take that
away from her?”

Orion hummed, as if he’d heard it all before – and they both knew that he already had. “And yet
you watch her without that ice in your gaze, still.”

“There are still enemies everywhere,” Annie said, pinning him with the ice that he scowled at. “I
need to watch her back.”

“Do you want to know what I think, darling?”

Annie ground her teeth at the name. “Not particularly – I wasn’t aware that you could think.”

“I think there’s another reason you kept her there for a year – kept her all to yourself.”

Annie’s eyes found themselves – again, as they so often were – on Y/N’s frame as the girl broke
through the last of the undergrowth with a quiet laugh of triumph. “I don’t know what you’re
talking about.”

She glanced at Orion, only to find his glare already on her. He shrugged, the movement more of an
excuse to flex his arm muscles more than a show of nonchalance. “Oh, but of course.”

Annie allowed him to hold her menacing stare for a beat – a beat where the surrounding titans
shifted uncertainly at the tension in the air. Annie couldn’t remember the titan boy before he’d
turned – but still, she couldn’t imagine those dark eyes as anything but threatening.

It was that moment that costed them.

A scream blitzed the tension and the silence of the air, the sound more of a yell – throttled, low,
scared.

Annie didn’t have time to evaluate what was happening – everything was a flurry of movement,
titans grabbing their weapons or shifting themselves into a defensive position. Her own axe hadn’t
left her own palm, but she still took a few seconds to turn and burst into a sprint towards the
scream.

Orion must have moved on pure instinct – for he was indeed ahead of Annie by those few seconds,
as if his first movement was designed to go right back to where the violence was taking place.
Annie pushed herself a little harder, pumping her legs with more power – so that she and Orion
were practically neck and neck as they both appeared through those final shadows of the trees,
sending snow flying in every direction as they skidded to a halt not two meters away from the
figure that both knew very well.

Belua’s face was cold, impassive – empty of the hungry eagerness that Annie had been expecting.

But before her -
Their faces did well to conceal the terror that they must have felt upon seeing the joint, primal wrath of Orion and Annie arriving like wraiths from hell – or Belua, who must have startled a scream from one of them as she came across them. Annie felt it all – felt the way that her knee popped from the pressure of the skid, felt the way that her hand slipped just a fraction on the handle of her axe.

Felt the way that those humans’ focus went right over her – as if Annie were nothing – and settled again on that of her Princess.

Armin Arlert and Mikasa Ackerman just looked at Belua with expressions of stunned amazement as the rest of the titan hunting party came crashing into the clearing.
The Prisoner

Annie couldn’t help the sliver of fear that she felt in her chest.

The ferocity that had been roaring in her veins suddenly took a tumble – even as it crooned silently at the sight of the two humans, knowing that at last the titans had found exactly who had hounded them over the months.

Exhaustion hung over them as a shroud – in that way that a few months alone in a forest could tire one’s spirit. The tiring marks, Annie suspected, were only physical; their eyes showed no weakness whatsoever. She shouldn’t have been surprised – not with the knowledge of exactly who they were. She knew them – knew that the raven-haired girl would have been a beauty if it were not for the dirt claiming the shine of her hair, which had been hacked off at her shoulders as though she had merely tired of its length. Her face was all angles and shadows, and it was hard to see that beautiful white skin because of the sweat and grime smeared across it.

As if she sensed Annie’s stare, Mikasa trained onto her with a predatory focus that easily could have been taught by titans. But in that movement, the girl had made her first mistake. Annie’s eyes rarely missed anything – and the glint of shock that lay underneath the mask of indifference that she projected with such supreme confidence was easy to catch. The slight widening of her mouth – recognition.

And the slightest crease in between her eyebrows – worry.

Not for her, Annie realized. Never for the traitor.

But for Belua.

The rest of the titan party had followed Annie’s lead and had fallen silent – if the palpable tension counted as quiet. Annie could hear it as easy as she could hear the thundering of her heart. In the moment where she was about to step to Belua’s side, the princess tore her hunter’s gaze from the humans and slid that deadly stare to Orion.

It was that moment that the leash holding back several hungry titans broke – the very moment that those E/C eyes hadn’t been holding those human hostages.

The beasts scrambled to get their claws into the humans, snarling and twisting over each other in that animalistic way that echoed in Annie’s own heart. For a moment, her body tensed.

“Hold them.”

It was a mark of how terrified the hunting party were of Belua that they all obeyed her order immediately – completing it brutally, efficiently. They kicked the knees out from under their victims, two titans to each of the human’s limbs. Annie scanned for the humans’ weapons but came up perplexed as she found none – glancing immediately to Belua.

Whether the princess understood was a different matter – she seemed entranced by the humans that now knelt before her, glaring at her from underneath their brows.

Annie cursed inwardly – this was the first time that Belua was seeing humans that she had known in her previous life. It was normal to be confused – previous knowledge screaming that they were friends, whilst biology commanded them to be food. But just as Annie was about to step in, Belua tossed her head and grinned.
To call it a grin was polite. It was merely a tool to bare her teeth at everything that moved.

Annie didn’t miss the way that Mikasa’s eyes tracked that movement.

Or the way that Armin shot a sidelong glance to her, as if in warning.

The blond boy seemed to be shivering, his panic palpable in the way that his eyes shot around the scene in front of him. But even as Annie outwardly sneered at the blatant display of terror, even she could not dismiss the intensity of that blue-eyed judgement as they rested for a fleeting second on her. It was nothing alike Mikasa’s stare, the thing that rivalled those of hunters and trackers.

Annie Leonhardt was no fool.

She knew well enough that the true threat lay with the boy that stared her down with the look of the emperor, the all-knowing, the one that plotted his steps five ahead of everyone else.

But he had to last that long first.

And with the way that Belua snarled at the titans holding them, all of whom looked on hungrily at their skin and the flush of their blood, Annie couldn’t see that as a tangible possibility.

It was Annie’s turn to experience terror for a brief second, however. The titans stiffened as Belua prowled closer – and Annie had to restrain herself from moving to the girl’s unprotected back, even if there was no threat.

At least she was faring better than Orion – as Annie chanced a glance at him, she had to look away immediately from the simmering power in his stare as he didn’t dare relinquish his attention from the princess for a single second – no.

That unrelenting stare was not on the princess at all, but on the girl on her knees before her.

Nevertheless, Annie redirected her own sight back towards Mikasa and the way that the girl’s onyx eyes scanned Belua up and down. But Armin did not merely stay silent as Belua squinted mockingly at Mikasa and moved her inspection onto him.

“I know your face,” he said, his voice high and clear. “But you – I don’t think that I know you.”

Annie snarled uneasily – a sound that had Reiner and Bertoldt move from where they’d been hovering in the background and come to her side. A side glance told Annie that they looked ashen grey as they too stared at the humans in silence. Mikasa – with the same violence-laced lip curl that Annie could easily remember - didn’t hesitate to snarl right back, her lips drawn back from her teeth.

“We do, however, know you,” Armin cut across his companion's snarl with ease. “Hello, traitors.”

“Hello, Armin,” Reiner murmured uncomfortably, knowing that all of the titans in the vicinity were looking at him with confusion. Annie didn’t have to look around to know that neither Reiner nor Bertoldt dared to move their shared death stare from the way that Armin fixed his own on them. “Dare I ask what you’re doing here?”

It was odd, suddenly, to hear how Reiner was trying to keep the inbuilt snarl from his voice. Too odd - Annie started to laugh a broken laugh, cocking her head at Mikasa. “The answer to that question is obvious enough, Reiner.”

Lips tugging upwards at Annie’s snigger, Reiner glanced to the taller male at his side. Bertoldt’s
lips shaped a single word that anyone could read easily enough. Eren. For a moment, the two males reverted back to their human personas that they’d been forced to wear for a year – they looked distinctly horrified, scared. But then Annie huffed a laugh again, meeting both of their eyes.

Their faces cracked into a smirk of evil. Reiner laughed, which only sparked Annie into a further spur of amusement that coaxed a snigger from Bertoldt in turn.

Later, Annie would not be able to say what, exactly, was so funny. Maybe it was the thought of Armin and Mikasa forcing themselves to follow the titans, living in complete destitution for months without actually gaining anything. Maybe it was the thought that they’d been caught, even after everything they’d been through. Maybe it was the simple fact that they had thought they could do it all alone.

But at that moment Annie just laughed, and Reiner and Bertoldt joined in.

Orion stepped into Mikasa's viewpoint, drawing her murderous attention back from the laughing trio. Annie quietened herself, watching as Mikasa shrank back from the deadly sadist's aura with the air of someone who was not exactly thrilled to do so. Those stunning eyes took all of him in steadily, matching Orion’s own glowing intensity.

Annie chanced a glance at Belua and immediately regretted it – there was now a calculated loathing etched on her own face, watching Orion project such intent into his eyes.

But Mikasa showed a lack of fear as she recognised the wickedness of Orion’s grin. It was only when she reached the iron ring on his finger that a deluge of shock coursed through her face.

Her eyes flew to Belua – and to the matching ring on her own left hand.

Annie hated that ring, that piece of a brand that she couldn’t rid her princess of. Truly hated it. But if there was one thing that was pointedly, painfully obvious – it was that Belua most certainly did not. Not as she delivered a razor-sharp smile that matched Orion’s, cutting Mikasa’s judgement in half. It was that moment, Annie knew, that Mikasa knew exactly what her Y/N was, what she had become in the months that they’d been pointlessly following them around.

Annie would have happily basked in the sorrow that then graced Mikasa’s features all day, but Orion dragged her poisonous attention back to him as he gripped her chin between two clawed fingers and forced her to look at him. “I don’t trust my court when they laugh. Especially when I don’t understand why they’re laughing – so, why don’t you tell me, pretty human thing, what my court finds so humorous?”

A second passed, and Annie idly wondered how long it would take for that pretty human to break. They always did – and with Mikasa’s wide, dark eyes, you thought that she might break right there and then.

But then she smashed all expectations into the dust as she shot a poisonous glare at Belua and spat right in Orion’s face.

***

Eren Yeager had experienced fear many times in his life.

He remembered the crippling fear that he’d felt shake his bones as he’d watched Armin stand in front of him, unwilling to let other people take him, but risking the lives of his own and the two other girls with them. He remembered the first crumbling of the wall, the screams of his mother as she begged them to run, the noise spearing itself through the fog that cowardice planted in his
mind.

But despite the fact that Eren Yeager thought he knew fear, and knew it well, this emotion didn’t even begin to approach that which he’d already felt.

No.

This feeling beat that past fear into the dust and set it aflame, terror seeping into the very marrow of his brittle bones.

It wasn’t even because of him. He’d been forced to live – if you could call what he did ‘living’ – in this cell for weeks now. At first, Y/N had kept him by her side, snarling and stating that it was important to keep every titan beast on edge – and that was what he was going to do, by presenting them with a constant temptation. But then, one day, she’d woken up as truly evil. He couldn’t explain it – that shift from controlled monstrousness to utter crazed evil.

She’d ordered him shoved into a cell. At first, he’d screamed all sorts of obscenities at the leering guards as they peered through the bars of his cage, crooning at the loss of his only remaining ally. He’d shouted and sworn and yelled until his voice felt ravaged within his throat, and even then, he’d glared at them with a gaze more intense than a fire.

But then he’d done what he’d once thought he’d never do.

He’d faded.

Although his voice had steadily crept back into being, he'd decided not to use it. Silence was preferable; it was always preferable to the snarls and the giggling on the other side of the bars. Silence meant that he was alone. Silence meant that it was safe. When it wasn't silent, and that small safety had been broken, it meant that the guards were back.

And with guards then came the pain, the touches, the other touches. But even though they sometimes beat him bloody, he still had to admit there was something wrong with their treatment; when paying attention to him, the brutes had never attempted to eat or kill him as they had with other humans that they’d dragged into the depths of the dungeon.

But despite all that he had seen within the weeks he'd survived down in this dreaded, stupid cell and all of the terror that he'd tasted, this scene was immediately crowned the ultimate worst.

He had been curled into the corner of his cell that was the furthest from the rusted bars, shivering due to the cold and savouring the silence apart from the slow dripping of moisture from outside his cell. There were bars quite high up on the stone walls that had been constant in his nightmares; the gaps in between the bars showed a forest outside, with the moss softening the harsh lines of the trees and leaves falling so close to his peering face that sometimes he could taste freedom.

But lately it had turned to cold and ice. His beautiful forest of green had turned white, bleached of colour and his flowers dead. The guards certainly didn’t care when his fingers slowly crept into a blue colour, and so he had been forced to stay shirtless in the dark, damp cell. He had curled himself into the warmest position that he could, in the corner that was furthest from his bars.

And then suddenly a door had been heaved open, and his heart had leaped in utter fear as he heard voices conversing. He had shrunk back, watching with wide eyes as titans had strode down the corridor that his cell was adjacent to. He had revelled in their ignorance of his existence, in the lack of jeers and punches thrown his way. But then they had dragged two struggling figures down the steps as well, and his heart - which had been hammering so hard in fear just a moment ago - had
clean stopped.

Because it took a moment, to recognize those dirty beings that had paused on the other side of his bars. But he knew those onyx eyes - one of which was a stunning shade of purple, a black eye that had been recently and forcefully bestowed - which had widened and brimmed with tears upon seeing his broken face. He knew those intelligent, ice blue eyes that looked downright murderous as they recognized him and his miserable existence.

He hadn't seen his reflection in weeks; he'd forgotten what shape his nose was, and how the shadows affected his cheekbones. He couldn't remember the exact colour of his eyes.

Eren Yeager tasted terror in a mouth that was used to it – but never in this quantity. His beloved siblings had been thrown in the same pit of hell as he had, and he didn't know how long they'd survive. He was terrified that there was a possibility that he might lose them in the darkness, exactly like he had been lost - all knowledge of the boy he had been fleeing into the endless cold.
The Proposal

Orion wasn’t mad.

No.

Mad didn’t even begin to cover the boiling, raw emotion that made him want to punch everything and anything. He could practically feel his temperature rising, the blood simmering in his veins.

No, he wasn’t mad.

He was enraged.

It was made worse as he stood in Belua’s bedchambers as she changed clothes in her bathroom. Ordinarily, he would have gleefully taken the opportunity to snoop around and sneer at the sheer amount of time she was taking to get dressed – but fury made it so that all he could see was that stupid, moronic girl spitting at him.

Orion did not know why she’d captured his gaze immediately, but she had. Her eyes – something about them called to him. He didn’t know why or how – and that made him mad. Mad enough that he’d found an excuse to kneel before her and grip her chin, jerking her head towards him so that he could get a closer look at what whispered to him beneath the endless black.

It wasn’t lust.

He’d seen Annie’s hardened, smug gaze as he’d been wondering about the human. He’d known what she thought, what she suspected about his intentions.

He knew enough about lust to know that this was not it.

Fury, though – that was the right word to use. After she’d spat in his face, it had exploded under his skin so that one moment later, the girl had been thrown to the floor by the sheer force behind his punch to her face. It hadn’t stopped Belua’s strangled laugh – the sound echoing in his reddening ears, even now.

Belua opened the bathroom door, her fingertips massaging the sides of her head at the sight of Orion prowling the length of her bedroom – as if he were the cause of her headache. He opened his mouth to snarl something, anything – but then he got a good look at what, exactly, she’d spent so long putting on.

The dress was beautiful. It was a pretty, idle green tunic that had been hinted with gold – and if Orion dared to be poetic, he would have sarcastically commented on how it offset the grey of the sky and the miserable weather. The rain had, after all, washed away snow so that it had become grey mush along the sodden grass, and the grey sky had continued to darken as the sun admitted its defeat. But the look that Belua gave him told him to shove his words up somewhere that he wished not to explore at this precise moment. “It crushes my ribs something awful,” she seethed.

The effect the corset had, in Orion’s opinion, was rather favourable.

But he was smart enough to like the fact his teeth were all in his head and knew to not say anything too stupid. “I think it’s nice.”

“Nice? I did not spend time figuring out the hooks and doom my lungs to get the praise of ‘nice’. It
needs to be stunning enough to make my Mother and Uncle think I was sulking all day.”

Orion allowed his hand to reach out and tug one of the frilled sleeves lightly. “Stunning, then.”

Belua raised an eyebrow and walked to the door, her skirt dragging along the floor. “That’s what I was going to say about that human’s black eye.”

Orion didn’t answer – just allowed his mouth to tighten as anger again simmered to the surface. It didn’t matter that his betrothed had walked out in a dress and every single rational thought had emptied from his head – the anger was still so close to brimming over.

“I know that you’re mad that I let them live,” Belua continued – using that damned word. Orion was not mad. “But I told you – they mean something more than just food. We don’t know if they’re truly alone or if they had help.”

“I don’t care,” Orion ground out. “Reiner and Annie took them to the prison. They can rot for all I care.”

To make sure that his words had just the right amount of dramatic flair, Orion flung open her bedroom door and stormed out. Bertoldt, standing guard a few meters away, swore at the sudden noise and followed Belua out, shaking his head at the combined attitudes that both of his rulers were projecting. “Just remember,” Orion barely heard her hiss over the sounds of his own footsteps, “I didn’t leave the castle.”

For a brief moment, Orion contemplated turning her over – if only to see just what the Queen or her Uncle would do. But then the flat edge of the Queen’s voice struck their little party with enough bite that he fell back, standing just behind Belua.

“And just what the hell have you done?”

Belua gave him a fleeting look before she turned a glower to her own mother, wearing an amber dress that clashed magnificently with that of her daughter’s. But Orion’s attention went to the silver crown upon her head, noting how Belua sneered at it as well. He could, if he tried, sympathize with her – the girl had been through hell and back in a human body, only to be denied her crown by her own flesh and blood.

Orion felt he was perfectly justified to pissed about it – if Belua had no crown, then he had none either. “What do you mean?” He replied to the Queen, twisting his body so that Belua was behind him. He liked to think of it as a protective gesture, but in actuality he could practically feel the sneer that Belua shot at his back. They both knew that she hardly needed protection.

Bertoldt, wisely, stayed still. He was far enough to Belua’s right that he was just out of punching range.

Orion did not flinch as the Queen’s arm shot out and nails dug into his ear as she pinched it, forcibly dragging his head lower. “You dare bring humans into this house?” She whispered in a low growl. “Do you not know what this could mean? What message this could send? I expected better from you, boy.”

It was the wrong day to push him. “It’s an interrogation matter,” he snarled. “It’s just two humans, and at the end of it – rest assured – I will end them.”

“We’ve already kept one for months,” the Queen hissed, shooting Belua a glare coated in barbed wire. Her nails released Orion’s ear and he straightened. “If that scum isn’t enough, kill it.”
“That one human is not going to ruin our empire,” Belua snorted. Ignoring her mother’s flash of ire, she stepped to Orion’s side neatly and wove her arm through his, tugging him lightly away. “I hardly think the other two that Orion caught would cause any problems. Unless you really think our society is truly weak enough to be toppled by three pathetic humans that are in our own dungeon.”

Orion didn’t need much convincing to give into the soft but demanding tugs of Belua on his arm – not when the Queen was glaring at them like she was contemplating their own death sentence. Orion took over leading Belua – especially considering that she was not meant to know where, exactly, the two humans were being held in the dungeon.

Bertoldt’s footsteps followed them as Orion led his Princess around her mother as if she were nothing but a displeasing canvas on the wall, heading down the stone staircase. They passed the Lord L/N, who was leaning against the doorway not a few meters away – but didn’t bother to explain themselves for a second longer.

With Belua’s cool fingers linked with his, Orion couldn’t help but feel the polished iron ring on her finger – a twin to the one that lay around his own finger, on the other hand. He wasn’t a fool – he’d seen the look that the raven-haired girl had given Belua after her eyes had lingered on the rings.

It had been only a few months since he’d given it to her whilst they were both alone. Everyone had known exactly when he was going to do it – whether that was due to the ironworker he’d threatened into making it and the fact he’d talked, Orion didn’t know. On the actual day, tensions had been running so high that even Belua’s Uncle had had to excuse himself from the court sessions – but only after he’d gutted three of the titans that he’d been meeting with.

Orion had been as proper as he could have been – formally asking the Queen and the Lord for permission to take Belua for a ‘stroll’. He didn’t doubt that everyone had known exactly what it had meant.

And even though the thought of asking for permission after all he had done had infuriated him, it still felt strangely right.

Had felt strangely right that Belua had agreed to go with him.

He’d wanted to make it as private as possible – had taken her far from the manor so that even its tall towers weren’t in sight any longer. There had been the perfect place – Belua had rolled the legs on her trousers and had waded knee-deep into the surprisingly clear river, looking out towards the miles of forest from the top of the waterfall, sunlight dancing on the running water that had surrounded them.

Titans were not meant to see the beauty in such trivial things, but Orion could not help it.

Belua was strong. She was his mirror – arrogant and cruel and smart. She had known him – before and after he’d taken his place as a true titan. In his own way, Orion supposed that he loved her – in whatever limited, twisted way that he could.

Maybe it was for that reason that Belua had allowed him to place the ring onto her finger, binding her to him.

“It’s iron and steel,” he’d said, noting her slight displeasure at his choice in metal – as if the titans were more born for mining and choosing fine metals! “It’s iron and steel, because they’re strong. And that’s what we’ll be – strong and defiant and together. You’ll be my weapon, and I’ll be yours. We’ll complete each other and never promise each other more than that.”
Her eyes had stared out from the waterfall, looking out to the horizon.

But she’d said yes.

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Belua followed Orion as he led her down towards the dungeons, Bertoldt following them both at what passed for a healthy distance. The Princess, ignoring the unresponsive Orion at her side, turned her head imperiously to Bertoldt and shot him a horrifyingly innocent smile. “Where are the others?”

“I hate to say it, but they’re guarding the humans from the other titans,” he answered, his eyes darting to Orion’s face before settling on that of his Princess’s. “The titans have gotten used to the other human boy we’ve kept down here, but to dangle another two in front of them is very dangerous, your Highness.”

Bertoldt watched as her nose flared, as if the other titans’ willingness to devour every single living thing was disgusting – or maybe it was their weakness at restraining their will. Bertoldt hadn’t quite accepted who Belua was – not as readily as Reiner or Annie had. He’d just continue to quietly observe, watching for the moment where a true conclusion could be made.

Their trio turned a corner, and he couldn’t help but notice how Belua’s muscles tensed at the sight of the dingy cells. His own mouth turned dry; he hadn’t dared to tell any beast of how, sometimes, Belua’s memories woke her up on the nights he stood guard at her door. He didn’t want to imagine what memories caused her to scream in the ways that she did, although he knew exactly what incident she was thinking of now – of another time, where feral titans had caught up to her in a forgotten dungeon cell and tore at her with claws and teeth.

Orion shook himself out of whatever stupor he’d worked himself into, but still didn’t seem to notice the tension of his bride’s shoulders or the way that Bertoldt made sure his eyes were pointedly on the floor. Perhaps that was just as well, as they turned down yet another corner and came to a halt.

Annie inclined her head at the Princess but didn’t seem surprised when Belua flatly ignored her.

“Hello, lovely,” Orion crooned, coming to a stop outside the cell that Reiner had been leaning against. The taller titan came to Bertoldt’s side in silence. Unperturbed, Orion peered in and gestured widely with his hand, beckoning Belua closer. Her face was carefully kept neutral, Bertoldt observed, even as she gazed within the cell to see the two humans standing upright and strong with their arms crossed. Bertoldt was still in awe to see that brilliant black eye on Mikasa, courtesy of Orion after she’d in his face. She wore it wonderfully well, even though it had almost swollen so much that she could barely see out of her onyx eyes.

Bertoldt held his breath, but he needn’t have bothered - Mikasa didn't deign to reply to him. As he watched Orion’s body steadily become bridled with tension, Bertoldt would have bet Reiner any amount of meat that Mikasa was looking only at Belua – as if the girl knew in her very core that she was pissing Orion off.

Belua smirked then, before her eyes slid to where Bertoldt, Annie and Reiner were standing. Widened, as if she’d only now recognised the fact that they were there. Belua then jerked her head at Orion, snarling a bit in a territorial claim that any titan with sense would understand. Pulling his lips back from his teeth, Orion retreated down the corridor, waving a hand at Bertoldt and the others to follow.
Bertoldt followed, knowing that Reiner would tug the unwilling Annie away with them. And with that, their Princess was left with the humans to exact her vengeance.

***

You hated this dungeon.

Actually, hatred didn’t even cover half of what, precisely, you felt when looking at the shadows. They waited until the sounds of the titans had faded up the stairs – far enough not to hear exactly what was said, but not far enough to be useless. “Who are you?” Armin asked with barely a flicker of fear hidden in his high voice.

“You know who I am,” you answered. You couldn’t repress the grin, the lines of cruelty that twisted onto your face – you barely even wanted to. “I am Belua, Princess of Titans.”

Mikasa’s face twisted – just the slightest amount – at the name you’d given to yourself. “Once, you were Y/N L/N, the number one student of the academy. You were the saviour of humanity, the leader of the Seven Deadly Sins. You were the saviour of us, several times. You were Pride; you were everything.”

The name practically hurt.

You hated that human name – truly detested it almost as much as the dungeons. But you’d sooner die than let anything understand and know that fear. You drew yourself up, higher, despite the corset crushing your lungs more as you stretched. “I suppose that I was,” you mused. It was almost laughable at how your tone had become nothing but pure malicious intent. “But now... Now, I am Belua, number one of the titan's army. I am the destroyer of humanity, the huntress of humans everywhere. I am the beloved of my cannibalistic people - I am pain and chaos and death. I am nothing more than a beast wearing the face of a human that you used to know.”

“And you are married,” Mikasa said softly, her eyes falling to your finger.

“Promised to marriage,” you corrected, raising the hand with the ring to your eye level. The iron reflected the meagre light that was in this hell hole, and you stared at your warped reflection before snapping your attention back to the humans. “If I had to pick one slobbering beast, it might as well have been Orion.”

It was then that Armin glanced to Mikasa, and the girl crept up to the bars of her cell and looked right at you. “Tell me that you're just lying,” Mikasa breathed. “I just need you to nod, Pride, to just tell me that you're just playing the role of a titan in order to bring those bastards to their knees. We've all been waiting for you to make your move... Just one nod, Y/N... Please!”
The Tears

Eren watched as the beautiful monster stood motionless in front of his cell.

That was the only mercy that he was granted now - he'd been here for so long that now almost everyone forgot about the shadow that he'd become, lingering in the same corner of his cell with hollow eyes and a dead personality. The girl stood proud and tall on the other side of the bars, so clean and dainty in comparison to the dark mess that was his home.

He remembered her. He couldn't remember the colour of his own eyes, but god, did he remember her.

H/L H/C hair still managed to have a shine in the absence of light and he knew that if she turned around, he'd be looking into cutting E/C eyes. They had always struck a chord with him every time that she had looked at him - ever since she'd broken into that wagon and grinned a wolf's smile at them, proud and fierce and strong.

But if Armin asked who she was, that meant that he was as aware as Eren was about the fact that she was no longer the girl that he’d once loved as much as he’d loved his siblings. And yet…

Though Eren knew as well as anyone what had happened, what the girl was… He still waited with a bated breath, watching for the slightest inclination of the girl's head, needing her to still be there, to still remember who she was to them.

The silence stretched out - too long. The girl was stationary, and although her back was facing Eren, he just knew that there was no expression on that sinfully beautiful face. His suspicions were only proven as a cool, dull voice rang out. “Did you really think that this would work?”

Eren ignored the voice; words meant little to him now. He continued to watch as Mikasa's face altered into one of shock, and the girl turned on her heel to suddenly face him.

She hadn't meant to face him; she just scanned the corridor – both ways. And then her eyes landed on him, and Eren forgot everything else.

Because although her head was not nodding, she was crying.

And Eren could see that with perfect clarity, the tears of grey filling those eyes and then dancing their way down her stone face. And maybe he imagined it – but her head dipped the slightest amount.

By the littlest breath – in fact, the dip could have been her own breathing. But Eren was not a fool; he knew that the girl could have chosen to be a statue, had she wished.

Mikasa sighed from behind Y/N, drawing Eren's attention to her. Mikasa's eyes were already on him, demanding an answer to her question - if he could see anything human within her titan face. Eren took a breath and then did what he knew Y/N was probably trying so hard to do.

He nodded.

And it was Armin - Armin - that smiled a sadistic smile and stepped forwards to the cell gate, silently opening it with ease. They’d picked the lock earlier. Eren didn't move, didn't give Y/N one hint that behind her, her prisoners were opening their gate. Mikasa had only said three words to him as she had passed his cell earlier, and so Eren Yeager was no longer afraid.
As Mikasa swung her fist at the back of Y/N's head, he finally stood up on wobbling legs, his unused knees complaining at the foreign movement. Eren straightened up and stretched, his muscles screaming in pain as he watched his brother rush to his cell to unlock its gate, Mikasa dragging an unconscious Y/N onto her back behind him.

Eren Yeager watched as his cell door finally opened and Mikasa's words to him echoed around his skull.

‘Get ready, Eren.’

*

Eren took one step, and then another.

His legs shook so badly that he highly doubted that he would be able to take another.

But he knew that if he failed now, he'd be stuck in this endless hell forever; he was not going to give that future one inch of a possibility. With Mikasa silently creeping away from him and Armin watching him with almost predatory focus, Eren didn't let himself think about the agony in his unused legs as they were suddenly forced to move at a fast pace. Instead, he looked at Y/N's head, which dangled upside down due to her body being slung over Mikasa's shoulder.

One foot in front of the other. Over and over again.

Armin kept himself close, his arm never far from Eren's side. The blond boy's eyes were shimmering with rage and concern and love for the broken boy beside him, but at this moment he merely bottled up his rage behind his gaze. Rage came with noise and screams and yells. Those things simply could not exist at this time, where silence was needed at every moment.

Eren paled slowly as he realized that they were not heading towards the exit, high up on the stairs. Mikasa lead their party through a matrix of twisting corridors, bordered by empty cells. Then, in a heart-stopping moment, she began murmuring.

"Please... Why don't you just nod... Why do you just stand there?"

Eren could have sworn that his heart had stopped in his chest, and it was only Armin's hard-eyed gaze that kept him from stumbling. Mikasa twisted her voice in a strange way, making it echo on the walls over and over again even as they crept on with silent footing. Suddenly, he understood - if anyone heard the absence of sound, they'd come to investigate. Silence was as loud as a scream, sometimes. Mikasa knew this, and so she kept whispering broken sentences of a girl who missed her friend.

He had no idea where they were going, just that it was so far from his cell that he could probably never find his way back. This revelation only brought him into a stunned state, one that glimmered with relief around the edges of his doubts. But that cell had been his for weeks. It had been the only thing that had tethered him to this damned world, the only space that he'd been permitted to stay.

But now that safe space was gone.

There was a possibility for new connections - unstable, unreliable tethers - but connections none the less. Mikasa and Armin were leading him back to a world that would hurt, and scar, and bleed. He was going back to a land that was being ripped apart by war, a land that was confined in fear...

Eren didn't have a chance to finish his thoughts as Armin full on slapped him in the face, the sound only masked by Mikasa's growl, her voice doing a wickedly accurate version of Y/N's own voice.
Anyone who had listened would think that Y/N had just slapped someone, not thinking that Armin had just slapped the boy that they'd kept prisoner in the dark for ages. Blue eyes met the dulled green with a silent order - to save panic for later.

Just as Eren was about to raise an eyebrow, asking for when later would be, Mikasa suddenly turned into a cell. Shoving down the instinctual panic that rose through Eren's gut at entering a cell willingly, he followed her into the surprisingly large space with Armin at his back. They stayed silent as Mikasa dumped Y/N on the floor slowly, every sound echoing slightly louder than what was normal. Eren knew that they were now on borrowed time - it was only so long until Y/N's guards figured out their princess was missing.

Armin kept his eyes on the corridor on the other side of the bars, watching for incomers, as Mikasa started prowling the length of the cell. Eren didn't ask anything, watching his siblings move in a harmony that was impossibly in sync, wondering what they were doing, until Mikasa blew out a breath sharply through her nose, attracting both boy's attention. She motioned above her head to where a large stone had a slightly different colouring to the rest of the ceiling stones that was surrounding that one.

He understood a split second before yells tore apart the silence that they'd tried so hard to maintain.

The yells echoed and scared him stupid, making him freeze in terror even as he watched Armin rush over to Mikasa and dig his fingers into the cracks surrounding that one stone. The blond boy shoved with all his might as Mikasa gathered up the fallen princess yet again. The stone groaned as it slid upwards, revealing a cold afternoon sky that was above the mansion's dungeons. No dust fell down – the notion itself making Eren pause and consider. No dust meant that the stone had been moved before.

Before he had time to ponder on that bit of information, real air graced Eren's nose. Before he allowed himself to feel more afraid of the titans that were now coming for them, he heaved himself awkwardly on top of Armin, his desperation making him even more clumsy than his limbs already were. Armin, to his credit, didn't make a single sound of pain even as Eren's bare foot suddenly found itself shoved into his cheek.

Eren stopped caring about the titans the moment that he found himself outside.

His fingers were intertwined with grass, the cool damp adding to his already chilled flesh. His chest - woefully caved inwards and covered in bruises and grazes - was bare, and the only clothing that he had on his frail body were some grey, ratty trousers that looked as though they had been rolled in dirt and worse. But Eren couldn't care as he was suddenly surrounded by air and light and grass.

He suddenly realized that he had been crying - his cheeks damp and his eyes aching at the foreign amount of light. Maybe he'd been crying since he'd seen Mikasa and Armin from his cell but hadn't realized it. He didn't have long to muse on it as he turned and grabbed Armin's hand, pulling desperately to get his brother up through the narrow space. He knew he wasn't making much of a difference, and that Armin was probably doing all of the work, but his muscles were too wrecked to be much help at all.

He sat back on his haunches as Armin then turned to heave Y/N to the surface, and then finally Mikasa. Armin replaced the stone back to where it had been, the outline of it blurred by moss and weeds, and Mikasa hastily hauled Y/N onto a more comfortable position on her back. Eren cast his gaze around - the stone had let them out literally five meters away from the tall walls of the mansion. He hastily looked for windows, but it seemed that this was the back of the mansion - there were no windows except those on the first floor, and they were close enough to the wall that
Eren doubted they could see them unless the titans hung themselves out of the window.

“We have to go,” Mikasa said to him, and started jogging into the barren forest that surrounded the mansion that had housed Eren for a year. “We have to go right now.”

“The titans aren’t that stupid,” Armin added, “they’ll know that we’ve gotten totally out before long.” He fell into pace beside Mikasa. Eren tried to move his legs, but they were weak and trembling. His lungs weren’t used to this; they soon began screaming for air as Eren dragged himself at Mikasa’s pace. He felt humiliated - he could tell that she was slowing herself down especially for him, even though she had an extra person on her back. But after a year in darkness, Eren supposed that it was only natural that the darkness had become deeply ingrained within him as well.

“Eren, please hurry,” Mikasa murmured, her eyes flitting between him and the mansion behind them. Due to the lack of leaves, they were still painfully in view if the titans got through the hole that they had. “We just need to go a bit farther.”

Eren wanted to snap at her, something cruel and mean and biting. He would have, if his lungs weren’t desperately trying to drag air back into his body, and his throat wasn’t calling out for water. He kept quiet except his gasps for air, his ears listening for any pursuers.

“We’ve been planning this for weeks, since the titans settled here,” Armin said to him quietly, as though he were some scared animal. Eren was grateful for the distraction of his brother’s voice. “We’ve had to track the titans across each house they’ve chosen, since Y/N only led us to the first one. Once they got to this one, we had to find a way in and saw a titan use it by pure luck. We’ve taken huge risks, camping around. Some days, we’d open the stone and creep around, trying to find where we were and how we could get to it. We’ve been in that dungeon more times than I can remember, just us, sneaking around in utter terror. I memorized when the titans went on hunting parties - looking for us, for the tracks that we left behind deliberately to lead them away - and it was those days that we got in.”

Eren didn’t say anything - he had sometimes dreamed that he’d heard people sneaking around the dungeons, their breaths low and threatening. He’d thought he’d been imagining things. “And today?” He gasped, hating himself for the cost to his breathing that merely uttering two words had caused.

“We’d had enough of waiting around,” Mikasa answered. “We’d memorized everything. We knew where you were. So, we had to get ourselves caught - and that wasn't hard. We only needed Y/N to come as well, otherwise we'd have been killed on the spot. But of course, Y/N was there, in the hunting party. She's never anywhere else than where she wants to be, right?”

Eren wasn't stupid - he knew that they were trying to distract him from something, to keep him focused on running. And if they were trying to keep him focussed on running, he knew that titans had seen them, somewhere along the way. If he strained his ears, he could have sworn that he could hear sets of very fast legs, probably gaining on them very fast.

His blood thickened in his veins, and he begged his legs to go faster. He didn't miss Armin’s face as his friend looked back at him with a silent plea to hurry, to flee faster. “Please,” Mikasa begged him, her knuckled tightening from where they were holding onto Y/N’s thighs.

And then Eren did a stupid thing.

He tripped.
It had been coming for quite some time now. His legs were spindly little things that looked like they could snap at any moment, and they simply were not used to this much movement. Eren didn't even realize that he'd tripped until the frozen ground suddenly loomed in front of his face, and he blindly threw out his hands to catch himself.

He looked up from the floor almost in slow motion. Mikasa and Armin were looking at him in absolute horror, and he felt sick to his stomach knowing that this had been his one chance, and he'd wasted it. He was then actually sick as he saw his sibling's hesitation.

They were hesitating to stop for him. They knew that he was half-dead and would only fall again if he could get up now. They knew that if they stopped, they had wasted their one chance at salvaging the plan that they'd spent the entire year making, carefully and carefully building it until they were sure they could accomplish it. Eren watched as they looked at him with the same evaluating expression.

The expression that said, as clear as day, ‘should we leave him?’

He sobbed in the dirt, his arms failing to lift himself. He started to drag himself towards them, probably looking like a half-crazed lunatic, not caring at the desperation that was surely etched on every line of his body. Mikasa jerked her head at Armin, and Eren nearly gave up right then and there as he watched the boy nod at Mikasa and sprint away, proving Eren's theory that they had been hanging back to account for him. Mikasa's lips tightened as she hoisted Y/N further up her back and stalked over to Eren, standing over him and glaring at someone that Eren could not see.

He decided that he very much did not want to see who it was – not as the simmering, low voice spoke. “Hello, lovely.”

“You have no right to touch this boy,” Mikasa said, her black eye looking worse in the dying sunlight than they had in the shadows of the dungeon.

“You have no right to take my princess,” another female voice snarled, and Eren twisted his head around to watch Annie Leonhardt, Reiner Braun and Bertoldt Hoover surround one of the most attractive males he'd ever seen in his life. Eren could tell that he was a titan immediately, even if his dark curls seemed childlike and innocent. It was etched into his core, that beast in front of him – the monster whose eyes never seemed to leave Mikasa or the girl that she bore.

“She is mine by right,” the brown-eyed male said with a sickening smile. “You've seen our rings.”

“A bit of metal doesn't mean anything,” Mikasa said, placing herself in front of Eren. “You will leave us now and return to your mansion like the good beasties that you are.”

A laugh ripped its way through all of the titan's throats. The brown haired one laughed especially loudly, the light gleaming on his pointed teeth. “Ah, lovely human thing,” he purred, “you do know how to amuse me.”

Eren saw Mikasa’s mouth open, but it wasn’t with her voice that words were suddenly formed. “Too bad that it wasn't a joke.” Eren swore and looked behind him, to where the voice had come from.

And then he fainted.

Because what he had seen had been a small army of humans, wielding swords and bows and flaming torches. Armin stood by the leader, an enormous man with eyes that looked just the same as Armin's, his large eyebrows scrunched in displeasure as he surveyed the little number of titans
that was before him.

Armin had come back, and he'd brought reinforcements.

And the relief at that fact brought Eren into a soft, cool world of blackness where he felt everything, and then nothing at all.
The Yield

Erwin Smith stood, proud and strong, in front of what little people he had managed to amass. For an army, they were a pathetic number.

But for a rescue mission, they would do well enough.

Beside him, Dot Pixis had gathered the third years of his school and had added them to his own numbers, doubling the size of the crew that Erwin had hastily rounded together. The scout’s numbers weren’t depleted entirely – but there were only so many that the leader could order to run at full speed at any single instance. As the two men had faced each other, two leaders of two different generations, Pixis had nodded formally to Erwin and had gestured to the red-haired girl – who had stood, stone-faced, silently at his side.

“Blame my presence on this one,” he had slurred, gesturing to Isabel Magnolia. “She got a letter from your second, it would seem, telling us to be ready. I assume this was the purpose.”

Erwin hadn’t seen her in the last couple of hours, whilst they had waited with bated breaths for the Mikasa and Armin to make their appearance. The letter that Erwin had received had been from the blond-haired boy, written in a hand that had looked like it had forgotten how to after a prolonged absence from literature. Armin had told him how they had found the titan’s home, hidden deep within a forest, and how they were going to get Eren Yeager and Y/N L/N out. Arlert had then, with a cheek that had amazed him, demanded Erwin's army as support.

But there was just something about the sheer amount of time and effort that both Mikasa and Armin had spent out in the wilderness, risking their lives to find the base that Erwin had allowed to become lost into the unknown, that had called to the leader of Survey Corps. So, Erwin had immediately jumped into action.

And that was how he was now here, in front of a meagre number of titans with a small army at his back. Armin was panting at his side, and if Erwin was stunned at his wild appearance, then it was nothing compared to what Eren looked like. Erwin had seen the boy mere months ago; the torture that was evident deep within his face proved he was a boy no longer.

Eren was on his knees, looking at him like Erwin was nothing short of his hero – before the boy slumped into the ground. Mikasa grinned a thin-lipped smile at the sight of the army – Erwin had to stop himself from swearing at the state of her black eye – before she turned coolly back to the leader of the titans.

“What is your name, beast?”

“Orion, at your service,” the brown-haired thing replied, looking hungrily at the body that was slung around Mikasa's shoulders. “And you have stolen what is rightfully mine. Give her back to me, and there will be no trouble.”

“You are in no position to be making demands,” Erwin firmly said, stepping forwards. He allowed his masterful aura to fill the clearing, knowing that everyone's attention was now on him. Even Orion looked at him with watchful eyes, taking in all of him. “We came for two people who are rightfully ours. We will take them.”

“Do you think that you're invincible just because you've got a few people behind you?” Orion said softly, and then - to Erwin's horror - he started stalking gently forward. He skirted around Mikasa,
who watched him with hatred seething from her every movement. He moved like water, calculating, gently and sternly at the same time. He stopped merely a meter away from Erwin, but the human felt gratified that Orion still had to look up to meet his eyes. “Do you think that you can really beat us, human? Our base is only a short distance away... All it would take is a single shout, and all of those beasties would all come rushing. We haven’t had a feast in so long,” Orion crooned, and Erwin felt almost sick at the thought of his men being under the mercy of the beast in front of him. “And I know of more than a few that would love to repay a favour to the leader of the army that ambushed us a few months ago -”

Erwin’s hand flicked up in a movement laced with quiet power, and Orion fell silent. “You think that you can't lose to us because you are monsters,” Erwin said, and his raised hand slowly clenched into a fist. “But that’s exactly your mistake; we’ve always had monsters here, too.”

There was a flash of silver as Levi Ackerman brought his swords down onto the titan with vicious speed and control, and Erwin smiled at the sight of his own monster snarling with feline ferocity at the sharp-toothed titan. “Oh, I remember you,” Orion laughed. At some point, the titan had managed to raise the magnificent sword in order to block the attack that Levi had stormed in with – too fast for Erwin to focus, for Erwin to see exactly where it came from or how Orion had managed to learn how to wield such weight with ease. Levi didn’t move – but his eyes flashed in a way that was akin to his swords, telling Erwin enough of how his fiercest fighter remembered the brute in front of him as well. Levi did not yield; he slid his twin swords down the monster of a sword, the resulting screech making more than a few onlookers flinch. Orion, though, merely grinned at the sound – as though there was no better sound for the monster made for war than the sound of blades screaming at each other.

Erwin could see his disadvantage with glaring clarity, though.

The fact that the titan still managed to grin was not comforting.

Any first year at the Assassination Academy could have told the onlookers as to who would win this duel; it didn’t matter that the broadsword Orion held with both hands held a stunning ruby, or that he was obviously born to hold it.

Broadswords were slow; they could not be used to both attack and defend at the same time.

The twin swords in Erwin’s second’s hands seemed to laugh as Levi swung them around in his hands, leaning forward just an inch.

Erwin normally prided himself on being adept at reading others – but he sincerely hoped that he was wrong in this instance, as he looked on Orion and could glean no sense of fear from those features.

Orion just grinned wider, taking deliberate steps back. “And why, pray tell, are you here?” At Levi’s lack of response, the titan cocked his head and threw his sword behind him with a carelessness that warned all watching that insanity was perhaps given a humanoid form in this creature. As Levi froze for a moment, eyes flaring in confusion, Orion smiled and whipped to the side – not heading for his attacker, but for one of his supporters.

Erwin supposed that it was a mark of either how much trust or how little sense that Reiner and Bertoldt had in their leader that they did not flinch as he drove himself towards them, his hands reaching out -

Erwin couldn’t help but frown as Orion armed himself with the two shortswords that, by pure chance, Reiner and Bertoldt had strapped to themselves that day.
“Similar enough,” Orion muttered, swiftly testing the balance on each blade. They were indeed slightly different, but from the way that the titan swung them around in his hands, Erwin had trouble telling. Levi didn't say anything. He did not give a single hint that he had anything but a plan as he watched his assailant once again stand in front of him; he merely took up his blades again and drove Orion back.

But for the slightest of seconds, Erwin saw Levi’s onyx eyes dart to Y/N's limp form and rest there, his lips parting in amazement. After everything, the man hadn't let himself hope that he’d get her back. But there she was, so close that he could almost touch her.

Levi poured his love for the girl into his expression, even if it only lasted for a brief couple of seconds. Erwin snapped his eyes to Orion, only to find the titan leader grinning at Levi - as if he knew exactly what was going on. “You don’t get to look at her like that. You left her,” he started to say, grinning sadistically. “She's mine now – do you not remember how you handed her over to me? She's not yours to take or give anymore. She’s mine.”

“She has never belonged to anyone besides herself,” Levi snapped, slicing his swords with such power that Orion finally drew his lips into a scowl – Erwin inwardly sighing at the lack of a grin. “But I've come to take her home.”

The titans surrounding Orion watched warily, not daring to do anything besides watch their leader. Annie, however, had her eyes on Y/N, fury glittering in her eyes. She was being held back by the other two traitors - Bertoldt and Reiner. They knew, somehow, that this was out of their hands now. Erwin was not going to question why they were not attacking.

Not as he stood, utterly stunned himself, as he watched the explosion that was Levi and Orion fighting. They were twin hurricanes, swiping and slicing and growling at each other, neither of them yielding a single inch. Where one was attacking, there was always the same defensive move and then there was another attack, and Erwin blinked in surprise as he saw that this would go on for a while - the two men were just equally matched.

And Orion was not even familiar with the blades that he was using.

Mikasa had started to move slowly back towards the army, closing the distance slightly. Erwin did not give the onlookers a single hint that anything was happening – but was tested as she kicked the boy lying on the ground. Eren came to almost instantly – and Erwin's heart clenched as he waited for the boy to scream in terror, to shriek or react to the potential death that surrounded him on all sides.

But it was indeed a sign of how much he’d been through – Eren’s eyes just widened as they met Mikasa’s, and he too started to drag himself back silently, readily going towards the waiting arms of his long-lost friends.

A boy that had once been so apt to yelling – now silent.

That transformation alone made Erwin to infuriated that he wanted to attack. Because he did want to - he really did - but there was just the problem of being so close to the titan’s base. If Mikasa and Eren had made it just a little bit further down the hill, to where the army had originally been waiting, it wouldn't have mattered - they could have attacked without raising suspicions. But here was too close. Here was too dangerous.

Erwin Smith, on any other day, would have attacked anyway. He always accepted the fact that most of his men would die, and he'd pay the debt of ordering them to their deaths in hell. But today
was too delicate - there were too many risks involved. If he fought and lost - which, statistically, was most likely - then he'd lose Levi, Mikasa and Y/N. Humanity would need them to move forward.

So, Erwin swallowed his blood lust and nodded his head to the settlement of men on his left. They started to rouse themselves; they would be the ones to hold of the titans whilst the rest of the army would escape. He watched their muscles tense, their grips on their own weapons tighten. His throat tightened at the sight – the sight of those men, ready to throw themselves into death in order for the others to get away.

Erwin continued to give orders to his men using his eyes and the tiniest inclinations, calculations running through his mind, until he was just a tad distracted.

Until suddenly, something happened that he couldn't have predicted.

Orion threw his borrowed swords into the ground, where one of the blades stuck into the ground, the pommel wavered with the force, and the other merely skidded. Levi suddenly twisted his body, avoiding the attack that he'd been planning, some ingrained sense within him telling him not to strike an unprotected opponent. Levi danced backwards with a lithe dancer's step, watching the now empty-handed titan with a furious glint in his eye.

“You know what?” Orion laughed, stretching his arms out behind him. “You're a pretty good fighter.”

Levi tossed his head, flicking his hair from his eyes. “If you want me to say the same, you’re going to have to die waiting for it.”

Orion nodded to himself. “I almost feel you should be rewarded; such a great fighter probably doesn’t get too many things. That’s a sad existence – and you know what? You can have the girl. Take her.”

Erwin didn't dare let himself react, other than to take two strides forward to suddenly be at Levi's side. Behind him, Y/N, Mikasa and Eren were already boarded onto a horse-drawn carriage and had already started the process of travelling home. The front of his army was masking all of that, quietly allowing the people to get away.

Orion laughed at Levi's frozen face. “Wondering what the cost is? I'll tell you - nothing. You can have her - for free. We'll even let you get away with all of your men; trust me, I'm cutting you a deal here.”

“I don't trust you,” Erwin stated, keeping his face impassive even as his world was threatening to fall away at his feet.

“I don't trust you either,” Orion grinned. “We'll still attack all of humanity later anyway. We'll still win. Just one girl - and whatever's left of the boy - isn't going to change that.”

And with that, Orion flicked his wrist and started the jaunty swagger back to his castle. The rest of the titans looked stunned enough that Erwin knew this wasn't planned, this wasn't an attack. The female that Erwin recognised as once being Annie Leonhardt looked insane with fury – even as she didn’t dare say anything. She and the rest of the followers had come prepared to fight – so what, exactly, was Orion doing?

“By the way, don't bother looking for us. We'll move to another location within a day,” Orion's arrogant voice soared back, to where Erwin and his army waited with stunned silence. “If we find
any of you near here within that amount of time, we will not be so lenient.”

***

You drearily opened your eyes.

Then blinked.

The blink did nothing to halt the headache that was ripping itself into your head, spearing from the constant pounding at the back of your skull.

But pain was good; pain meant that this was real, that you were real.

Your memory was disjointed; you remembered Mikasa, you remembered looking down a shadowy corridor – where light was dim, where the smell of blood and worse was putrid, where all manners of things ended up behind bars.

And then – nothing.

From the jolting and swaying, you had enough sense to know that you were lying on your back in a carriage – drawn by a horse, if the pounding was anything to go by.

That, paired with the pain at the back of your head, was enough to tell you roughly what had been the aim of knocking you out.

But now the question was who, and why?

You slowly and steadily propped yourself up on your elbows, tears coming unbidden to your eyes at the movement. You hadn’t felt as dizzy as this in a while – your limbs were heavy and your movements carrying nothing of the natural grace you’d spent years perfecting.

But you were awake, and that counted for something.

Moving your head as little as possible, you widened your eyes and scanned your surroundings. The cream canvas above you was illuminated – it was still during the day. Due to your body’s lack of hunger or other needs, you hadn’t been out for too long – perhaps only a few hours, if it was still the same day.

On the wooden floor of the carriage beside you, Eren lay covered by a cloak. You flinched at the sight of his face, the bloodless pale colour of the skin, the way that bruises were scattered down his neck. You had no doubt that if you were to lift the cloak and inspect his body, there’d be far worse than just bruises.

You didn’t want to give yourself time to think about the questions that you wanted him to answer. Did he hate your face now? Does he know that it was your fault?

Suddenly, something moved behind you – someone climbing into the carriage that you were in. Your body froze for a single second before you wrenched yourself backwards, to the wooden wall that separated you from the horse leading the carriage to god-knows-where. You didn’t care as you tripped clumsily over your own limbs, trying to get away from the sound, your breathing coming in gasps.

And the pain wrenching itself through you in response to the action was nothing short of paralysing.
“Don’t act so pathetic,” the person hushed you, crouching as far away from you as they could. You widened your eyes at Mikasa as her eyes went straight to Eren, lying just in front of you. “If you touch him, you’re dead. I don’t care that you used to be my friend.”

You opened your mouth, wondering what on earth to say. There were a million things that you should say, that you would say – but all that tumbled out of your mouth was “you... Knocked me out?” You flinched at the sound of your own voice; never before had the snarl and vicious undertone of it been so obvious to you.

Mikasa smirked – whether in response to your obvious pain, or in pride of the memory, you didn’t want to know. “Titans always underestimate humans. I just used that to my advantage.”

“Where are we going?” You whispered, despite the fact that there was no need to. It was then that you saw something with vital clarity – your wrists. Chains were wrapped loosely around them, bolting you to the metal ring in the floor.

They’d chained you to the floor.

Trapped you.

Mikasa’s smile faded as the girl perhaps watched hysteria begin to take hold. “What are you?” She whispered back, her chin lifting.

You looked at her, your chains clinking as you raised your hands to touch your own head. You combed through your hair/righted your hijab, the motion useless in its aim to calm yourself down. Your fingers froze on the lump that was on the right side of your head, at the back. Your lips trembled as your finger tips then travelled south, to your neck.

To the scar that marred the skin there.

“I am human.”

“You’re a liar,” Mikasa retorted, but you saw the way that her lips were strained, her eyes darting up and down your face, searching for the answer of an unspoken question. “You might have nodded in the dungeon, but you’re still a titan.”

“Why would I have nodded if I were a titan?” You asked, looking at her in wonder. Wonder that quickly turned to temper – flaring through your veins and mouth. “If you truly think that I am a titan, why am I not tied up properly? You left me in here with Eren, knowing full well what I could have done with half-assed chains! What is wrong with you?” Mikasa glanced behind uneasily. Someone was out there, you realized, listening to everything that was being said. You’d care about that later, once your fury had cooled itself. “Tighten these chains right now, if it makes you feel better. Tighten them, and I’ll answer your questions. And my daggers – I stashed my daggers in my boots. Take them away from me but keep them safe. And - ” You added, as an afterthought, “loosen my corset; I can’t breathe, and that’s not going to help anyone.”

“You’re not in a good position to be making demands anymore, Princess,” Mikasa softly said, but moved towards you all the same. You shot her a look edged with temper, shoving your wrists into her reach. Your stomach was threatening to empty itself at the thought of allowing yourself to be truly contained, but for your friend’s peace of mind, for her sacrifice to follow you into the wilderness for all of these months, you would allow it.

Just this once.

“I’m not a titan,” you murmured as her hands expertly navigated the links of the chains. “I had to
pretend. Annie didn’t believe my first attempt – so I had to make it better after that.”

“We can’t just accept that,” Mikasa replied, looking back at her brother. “But you – you are not a titan?”

“It would seem not,” another voice interrupted behind Mikasa. “I hardly think a titan would beg to be chained tighter – not in this situation, at least.”

A fresh stream of tears assaulted you as Levi Ackerman appeared. He flung himself into the carriage with the grace of a deer, not even halting his movement as he reached for you. You instantly regretted having Mikasa tighten your bonds as you couldn’t reach for him as well – but in the moment that your eyes met his, you didn’t care about anything else.

You didn’t care that Mikasa had to suddenly duck out of the carriage, muttering to herself as she fell into a run behind it.

You didn’t care where you were anymore, or why you were here, or what anyone else was doing.

You didn’t care about your wrists being bound in heavy iron shackles.

You threw your bound hands around his neck as your body was caught by his waiting arms, and you hugged yourself to him as tight as you could; there was no longer your body and his, just your bodies together. You buried your face in his shoulder, sobbing into his shirt as your fingers tangled in his hair and his back. Your legs wrapped around his waist tightly, and his body shuddered as he stopped moving and just held you with equal need.

You did not know how long you both were sat there.

As Levi drew your face away from his shoulder, lowering your chin so that your eyes were level, you decided that as long as you could spend as much as time as you could with this man, you wouldn’t mind if it was only a minute.

But as you kissed him with the desperation of someone dying, you forgot about that. You forgot about time, and the world, and titans and royalty.

Because underneath all of that, there was him.

There was just him.
“Missed me?” You breathed, the moment that you had to draw yourself back in order to get a
decent breath into your lungs. Levi kissed you again before responding – a sweet, lingering kiss
that made your heart ache.

It was as though this was the reason you’d given yourself up to the titans in the first place – this
man beneath your fingertips, the man who had somehow seated you on his lap so that there was
barely an inch between you. This man was the one thing that had gotten you through the months
spent as a beast.

“Does the sea miss the sun when it no longer shines on its waves?” Levi answered, his fingers
running up and down your shoulders as though he couldn’t believe that you were real.

You smiled, and the ball of tension in your head eased a little. “I don’t know – does it?”

“There is not a word in our language to express the things I was feeling the moment that you were
taken,” Levi said, his eyes almost becoming darker as he caught your gaze and held onto it. “But I
assure you, Y/N, that I am so pissed at you that you can’t even begin to imagine it.”

“You have a lovely way of showing it,” you cooed sweetly, deliberately running the very tip of
your nose down the side of his neck and enjoying the effect it had on him – the shivers that coursed
through his body, the goosebumps that rose on his arms. “Maybe I should piss you off more
often.”

Levi’s hands grabbed your shoulder and nudged you away, perhaps forbidding himself from
enjoying your ministrations too much. “Is that a promise?”

You winked. “If the poodle desires it.”

“That is indeed just one of the things that I am extraordinarily annoyed at you about,” Levi
ceded, his hands going to the neck of his shirt and drawing the band of leather that had hidden
underneath the collar. “The bracelet broke during a training exercise,” he explained, interpreting
the beginnings of a grin on your face as perhaps the markings of a grimace. “Trust me, I personally
oversaw the punishment of the one who broke it.”

The poodle charm was now on a thicker band of leather, gleaming at you even with the overhead
canvas of the carriage covering any direct sunlight – as though he’d been polishing it. There were
no hints of dirt or tarnishes on the cheap metal you’d luckily gotten your hands on in the months
before everything changed. “If you found those presents, I have the right to be mad at you,” you
accused him, your own fingertips running down the smooth lines of the charm. “It means that you
were snooping, Ackerman.”

“It wasn’t me who found them,” Levi rolled his eyes. “And I assure you, if I’d been the one
snooping, I would have been more occupied with the other items I would have found.”

You hummed, ignoring the obvious innuendo pointedly. It had suddenly hit you that Eren was
indeed still on the bench to the side, his breathing regular enough to inform you that he wouldn’t
be awaking any time soon.

His presence hurt.

“It’s my fault,” you whispered. “Everything is my fault.” Levi growled in response, his fingers
finding their way to your chin, forcing you to look at him. “Don’t try and tell me that it isn’t,” you said, keeping your eyes on the boy across from you instead of the one almost begging you to look at him. You couldn’t help but notice Eren, now – notice and wonder if this was the first decent sleep that he’d had in a long while. “He was the worst sacrifice that I had to make.”

Levi said nothing in response to that – whether it was because he genuinely didn’t know what to say, or if he thought he needed to give you some space to sort out your own thoughts, you didn’t have a clue. But you could read him. You could see the tension being exerted from the lines of his muscles, from feeling the way that his legs were tensed underneath you. You could read his anger in the way that his jaw was tight and his eyes were a flashing grey – the kind that a sword would gleam with as you swung it under the winter sun.

“Why did you ask that girl to tighten the chains?” Levi asked after a few moments of silence.

You stared at him for a few beats of your shared heartbeats. “Her name is Mikasa. We saved her – you should know her name.”

Levi gave you an incredulous look. “She’s another brat who is going to make my life very difficult in the next few days – why should I give a damn what her name is?”

“Mikasa is the brat who is one half of the reason you knew where I was,” you said, temper flaring. The temper soothed the rest of your anxiety, stroking itself over the edges with a pleasant flame. “At least show decency and thank her for that – she gave months of her life to following me.”

“It wasn’t just for you,” Levi retorted, but you both knew it was an empty accusation – you could read the apology behind the steel of his eyes. “You are extraordinarily good at dodging questions, aren’t you?”

You cursed for a moment – you’d hoped he wouldn’t notice. “Deceiving is one of my specialties.”

“Talk to me,” Levi said. “I know that you hate being chained and restrained – and yet you were encouraging Mikasa into tightening them. Talk to me.”

For a moment, you considered telling him.

Telling him that you did not feel safe within your own mind – not anymore.

She was still there. You felt her underneath your skin, grappling with the darkness of not being allowed to control movements and speech anymore. You’d created that beast – the true titan form of yourself. You’d allowed Belua to take over your movements, to take hold of your very body.

You weren’t a titan – you knew that much.

But she was. That character that you’d created the moment that you crushed yourself on that battlefield, ready to hand yourself over – she had been the start of it. And then Annie had come along and seen through her, had still managed to see the true human hidden beneath the skin of a titan. The moment you had awoken to find your own blood hot against the skin of your neck and her standing over you with reverence written over her face, you’d had to make some hard decisions – very quickly.

Had given yourself entirely over to that monster that had suddenly surfaced under your skin, had surrendered control of your limbs to that thing.

Belua had done a better job of convincing everyone than you ever had – but separating the two people that you were in your head was hard.
It was why you’d refused to hear any of the titans call you by your true name – had lashed out at Orion multiple times because of it, because of his stubbornness at still calling you by the name you treasured for its humanity.

And now –

Now was the hardest moment.

But how could you ever tell Levi any of this? How could you sit there, mere inches from his eyes and face and tell him that getting you furious was now – quite literally – a death sentence? That your fingers instinctively went to claw and scratch at his skin before you directed a harsh thought at them to stop, to caress and stroke instead?

You weren’t a titan.
You weren’t.
Couldn’t be.

Instead of giving a single hint of the internal crisis to the male mere moments from you, a command slipped from your lips instead. “Just – tighten my chains.” Levi’s eyes dulled at your response, and your unspoken decision to remain silent. He lightly pushed you from his lap before kneeling obligingly at your feet, waiting a few moments to look up at you with another innuendo-laced gaze. You smiled back – watching as his hands barely touching your ankles as he fastened chains to them; marveling at the lightning fizzing up your skin in response to the merest of touches. You blushed and looked away, embarrassed, but then Levi was standing up and turning away. “Where are you going?”

“Not far,” he replied, watching as you tested the new chains. They were shorter – it was now impossible to reach Eren.

Good.

“You have a talent for dodging true answers, do you not?” You said, watching as he whistled to a horse that he’d probably hooked to the carriage upon entering. There was a beat of silence that told you enough of his dilemma of wanting to tell you something tangible, but not being supposed to.

“I need to talk to Erwin,” he said, not entirely meeting your eyes. You heard the unspoken rest of the sentence – about you. He needed to discuss your fate with Erwin goddam Smith without you there.

You bit your lip as you swallowed your indignant thoughts at being left out – but stopped that gesture almost immediately. Levi would see it, would mark it – and would translate it into nervousness. And any fool knew that where nervousness was present, a wrong had been done. “It had better be about the long time he took to come and get us,” you tried to rectify your mistake, but it hardly mattered - he had jumped from the moving wagon onto his horse in a single movement.

He still moved in the style that was akin to both fire and water at the same time – something that had first attracted you when you’d willingly taken a beating from him. “Before I go for a second,” Levi said, casting his eyes downwards, “I just need to hear it from you – are you a titan?”

Temper flickered back into being – hot, glorious temper. “Why don’t you take a guess?” You snapped, only regretting it a slight amount after Levi’s face tightened.

“I think you’ll find that you’re about to be asked that quite a bit in the next few days,” he replied
coolly, with equal attitude. “You’d do well to get a decent answer ready.”

“You should know how well I fare with being told what to do,” you said, tossing your head and frowning. “Why would you think I was a titan, anyway? Didn’t you just kiss me?”

What little warmth lingered in Levi’s eyes winked out, as quickly as blowing out a candle. “Mikasa has an opinion – and there’s the matter of your scar.”

“The scar that you are fully aware that I gave to myself?” You said, raising an eyebrow. You weren’t surprised he’d seen the scar on the back of your neck – not at all.

“The scar that looks suspiciously fresh, almost as though you’ve recently undergone the true operation,” Levi replied. “That, paired with the fact that you imprisoned and tortured the only human linking you back to your old life, does not bode well for you.”

You flung out a hand at that – as far as the chains allowed the movement, anyway. “You don’t get to throw that back at my face. I told you – Eren was the worst sacrifice that I had to make. If that makes me a titan, I suppose that you have your damn answer. Now go and report to your master, dog.”

Levi didn’t say another word as he threw away the ropes connecting his faithful horse to the carriage and rode him swiftly to the side – but you caught the way his lips had tilted into a sneer. A few months ago – before everything had changed – you might have regretted the words that you’d spoken. Might have tried to repent and apologise.

But you were not the same girl from a few months ago, and you thought that he highly deserved it. Did he truly not believe that you were a human? And if it was such an important factor, why had he kissed you without knowing the answer?

As you fidgeted around, trying to rid your body of any lingering traces of pains brought about by the chains, you cried out as a particular movement caused the skin of your ankles to be sliced. Your chains allowed your hands to go straight to your boot, to which you impatiently heaved the skirts surrounding it away and pulled at the daggers that you had stuffed there before.

The green dress didn’t exactly warrant a weapon’s belt, after all – and you’d been preoccupied with having your Mother believe that you hadn’t had anything to do with bringing either Mikasa or Armin into the dungeons. So the faithful daggers had gone into your boot, only to just slice a neat cut horizontally up the leg, north from the ankle.

A thought had you holding them for a brief moment, the warm amber metal gleaming even in the dim light.

A second thought had you wincing as you considered any of the humans finding you in the same carriage as Eren Yeager, holding daggers and bearing an expression that would tell them that you were thinking quite hard about something.

You couldn’t exactly stash them anywhere in the carriage – they’d be found. And if you continued to hide them under your own clothes and the army found them later, it would then cause the difficult questions to be asked. And if your humanity was already under paranoid-stricken curiosity, you hardly wanted the daggers to make things more difficult.

These thoughts made it entirely easy to throw them out of the wagon – hoping that nobody was watching, that nobody would notice and question the movement.

Your hopes were dashed, however, as someone barked a swear word outside. You flinched as that
someone else neared the edge of the wagon, leaning forwards so that you could see the furious face under the glare of the sun. “That was not safe, you bitch –”

“I don’t know what you’re on about,” you garbled. It had been an entirely long time since you’d had to deceive anyone about your innocence. You drew your body into itself, physically making yourself smaller, slighter – and you widened your eyes, hoping that the colour would shine in the shade of the wagon. “Is everything alright?”

The man blinked, casting his eyes behind his horse. Luckily, the speed at which the army was moving was enough that the daggers were probably too far behind on the ground to be seen easily. “You just threw knives, you beast, and they nearly got my horse. You can’t pull any of that rubbish with me.”

You blinked and allowed your mouth to open in shock. Guided by a distant memory of a girl with blue eyes and blond hair, you commanded your eyes to water. “I can’t throw anything – my hands are chained!” You rattled the chains loudly in an effort to convince him – making sure that he noted how little reach Levi had left you. By not stretching the chains to their full extent, you made sure that they looked even shorter.

Of course, their full length had been enough to throw some daggers – but the soldier had no need to know that.

“I don’t trust you,” the soldier said. “I know who you are.”

Inwardly, you groaned – you’d made your eyes water for nothing. “If you know who I am,” you said, the high-pitched child’s voice falling away and leaving the classic purr of midnight, “then you know I wouldn’t have missed if I had thrown any daggers.”

The soldier smiled, then. “I never said they were daggers.”

You threw him a vulgar gesture in response, fighting off the flush of shame. You couldn’t even fool a simple human? It was almost shameful – had you lost your touch? “If I threw them, they’d be on the ground somewhere. Go and find them and then come back to me with proof, you ass.”

The soldier considered this for a moment, before sniggering a little and pulling on his horse’s reins. Whether or not to actually look for your daggers, you didn’t know. But you did get half an answer as to why he’d left – and it was because you had gotten new visitors.

“Y/N?”

The sound of your name jolted you, at first. You’d gotten so used to only allowing the name of Belua to be addressed, so used to gutting people if they refused to call you as such that perhaps your true name would always cause a little disgust to well up within you.

You shoved that internal crisis aside – swept it away in the face of your visitor’s blue eyes looking at you with unparalleled intelligence. “Erwin Smith,” you said, a smile working its way onto your face despite everything. “You know it’s been quite a rough day when I’m pleased to see you.”

“I’ll have to try and not take that personally,” Erwin replied, gracing you with a small smile that didn’t meet his eyes. He didn’t make a single move to come into the wagon where you were chained; he stayed on his enormous white stallion, trotting just outside. His eyes scanned you once - twice - before coming to rest on your face, which you carved into a smug grin. “Would you believe me if I said that I missed you?”

“Not in the least,” you replied, winking at him. “I’d believe you, though, if you said that you
missed the challenge that I was.”

“True enough,” he conceded, cocking his head the tiniest amount. “Now, are we ready to skip the pleasantries?”

You sighed, rolling your eyes. “I gave myself up to give you a fighting chance a few months ago and managed to forgive you for being an ass to me, and this is how you treat me? Surely you can spare a few pleasantries to make a girl feel appreciated?”

“You’re tongue remains as silver as ever,” Erwin said, adjusting himself on his horse. “Now – who, exactly, are you?”

“Y/N L/N,” you said, perhaps too quickly – the name tasting strange on your tongue, despite everything. When he didn’t respond, you stuck your tongue out and bared your teeth. “The right question would be to ask what I am, wouldn’t you say, commander? But I have a feeling that you know the answer to that question,” you teased, your voice hitting a low note. You crept towards him slowly, the chains at your feet difficult to move in, but still movable – but still within a certain range. The chains weren’t long enough to allow you to launch yourself at him, unfortunately, and tackle him for asking stupid questions.

“I have to say, I honestly don’t know what you are,” Erwin replied. “You were always a girl who I’d mark as the most titan-like. And now this is all just confusing for an old man such as myself.”

“You barely have a grey hair on your head,” you scoffed. When Erwin didn’t deign to answer you, refusing to indulge you in some kind of conversation where your humanity was not being doubted, you pouted. “Honestly, does no one like to play anymore?” You bared your teeth and tapped on your canine with a S/C finger. “I’m a human, see? Ordinary teeth.”

“There are millions of titans that choose not to file their teeth down,” Erwin flatly said. “That means nothing.”

“If you’re asking for proof of me not being a titan, I’m going to struggle to provide biological evidence for you,” you told him, unable to keep the mocking tone from your voice regardless of the truth that you spoke. “As for psychological factors – I’ve told you that I’m human, and I doubt you can find a true titan who can say the same.”

“Annie Leonhardt did,” Erwin said, and he gave you the first true smile you’d seen as you flinched in response.

“Sadist,” you muttered, glaring at him. “That was spiteful. She betrayed me, too.”

“She fought quite hard to keep you with her,” Erwin said, raising one of those infamously large eyebrows. “I would take a guess that she had to be carried back into the castle to retrain her from following you.”

“Why – why isn’t she following me?” You asked. “Where is Orion? Come to think of it, what even happened after Mikasa knocked me out?”

“Perhaps,” Erwin said, quietly, “if you consider answering some of my own questions, I would do the same with your own.”

“You can’t do that,” you seethed, temper awakening again – so recently calmed, as well. “I’ve answered your question. It’s not my fault that you don’t believe me when I tell you that I’m human.”
“Care to explain the scar?”

“Not until you tell me where Orion is,” you sniped back, a lash of fear then taking hold of your bones. Erwin glanced to the left and jerked his head at someone who was clearly waiting a few meters away out of your sight. A raven horse swerved to trot at Erwin's side, and you couldn't help but feel a jolt of exasperation. “The dog returns to his master at long last,” you swoon, shooting a glare at Levi. He shot you an equally attitude-fuelled glare back.

“Save your personal quarrels for later,” Erwin interrupted, a hand rising to massage his temples. “Right. We saved both you and Eren from the titans, which is a bit of a stretch. But that required getting you safely and quietly to the point where we were – hence, Mikasa bestowed a blow to your head.”

“But now you’re questioning whether it was worth it,” you said, grinning at him. “Because now you realize that you have no clue as to if you're letting a fox into a chicken coop.”

“Accurate as ever, miss L/N,” Erwin conceded, his eyes gleaming. “And you are certainly not helping your case.”

“I’ve only ever said that I was a human,” you repeated, with all of the insolence of a small child. “That’s all I’ve done.”

Levi shot you a patronising glance – only because he knew that it would make you angry. “And yet your scar says otherwise.”

You bared your teeth at both of the men before sitting down leisurely, stretching out your body. “We are mean today, aren't we? Both of you seem obsoletely certain that I am a titan and are unwilling to argue with me about it. Seems incredibly stubborn and unfair, in my opinion.”

“Your very respected and infamously fair opinion,” Levi sneered, and your heart leaped at the promise of a little banter. But Erwin seemed ever unwilling to listen into your quarrels, and so you reached up to your hair/ under the hijab to pull out a hairpin that you almost always tucked behind the strand of hair behind your ear.

Levi sniggered as you waved the hairpin in front of his eyes. But Erwin - Erwin's eyes sparked with realization of what you were about to do just a moment before you did it. You smiled a sadist's smile at Levi as you snapped the hairpin in two, leaving a wickedly sharp stick of metal in your fingers.

Levi didn’t even flinch as the spiky end found itself in his face, the mere nick hardly painful. But it amused you, nonetheless.

You stowed the other half up your frilled sleeve, sniggering at the shock on Levi’s face in order to cover up your movements.

“Are you actually a child?” Erwin asked, his tone edging more into confused territory.

“What did I just say about being nice...?” You said with a sing-song voice. Erwin rolled his eyes, but Levi had regressed into scowling back at you. You pointedly glared right back, and it wasn’t until Erwin swiftly – and lightly – punched Levi on the shoulder that the shorter male wiped all emotion from his face. “An apology would have sufficed, but I suppose that will have to do,” you grunted. Erwin seemed at an utter loss, and you couldn’t help but feel slightly bad for him. He had thought that gaining you had been a win, but hadn't predicted the double-edged sword that he now had in his possession. "Now, pray tell - where is Orion?"
You didn't miss the furtive looks that Erwin and Levi both gave each other at the sound of his name. “We don't know,” Erwin said, carefully. You weighed his words - truth. But there was something that he was omitting. “He handed you over to us without a fight. He's probably moved the entire titan establishment again now as well - there's no point trying to escape.”

“First of all, escaping would be useless,” you said, but the emptiness of your voice was anything but an act. “He handed me over,” you repeated, mostly to yourself. Somewhere, deep within your gut, you felt the betrayal. You'd trusted Orion to protect you, or at least fight someone for you. “He handed me over without a fight?!”

“He did,” Erwin said, but there was cold calculation over his face, and you realized – too late – that you’d fallen for a small trap. He’d been trying to see if you’d known about a plot that involved Orion handing you over, perhaps as a bomb waiting to go off and take as many humans as you could with you. But a moment later, you found that you didn’t care about that – Erwin could have that information, to use as he wanted. He would anyway, with or without your blessing.

“We all knew he was scum,” Levi said, looking over his shoulder nervously.

“I wasn't saying that,” you cut across him. As he looked at you with an unspoken question in his eyes, you saw the opportunity to cut him deeply - and took it. “I was saying that maybe I should get used to it. After all, that isn't the first time that someone that loved me handed me over without a fight, is it?”

Erwin's eyes flashed with warning, for you or for Levi, you didn't care. All you cared about was the blankness that slowly took over Levi's face, blocking his expressions from you.

Perhaps blocking any further quips you could fire at him, too.

“I'm leaving,” Levi told Erwin shortly, before reigning in his horse harshly and turning it away.

“Wouldn't be the first time,” you shot after him. Although he did his best to hide it, his body stiffened slightly; he didn't turn to look at you at all before cantering away, somewhere to the far left, where the walls of your wagon restricted you from seeing him and the rest of the army.

A sharp sigh drew your attention back to the man that was left.

“That's just made it more difficult,” Erwin groaned, his eyes not on you - he was watching his second canter away from him. “Because now there's the question of what to do with you.”

“The titans won't negotiate for me,” you told him dully. “I'm no longer the sole heir to the throne. You met Orion? He's the future king; he'll appreciate me out of the way anyway. Perhaps that was why he let you take me.” Erwin didn't look at you with pity, or sympathy, or anything. He just looked at you.

You revelled in that small moment – a look where he wasn’t solely evaluating you on your looks or actions, but a look where he just saw you.

Then that moment ended, and he was back to calculating again. “If you were indeed entirely human, you could have gone back to Survey Corps school,” Erwin said, his voice blank. “If you were entirely titan, you would have come back to the Scouts with me, for experimentation.”

“But how unfortunate for you – you can’t decide whether to believe me or not,” you said, leaning back. “Perhaps it’s indecision that’s been plaguing the Survey Corps recently. You, with what to do with me – and Levi, with how to feel about me.”
“Yes,” Erwin said. “Thank you for summing that up.”

You gave him another dry smile, but this time it was strained. Rather than just wait for him to speak again, you turned your back on him and crept lightly to the back of the wagon, the furthest from him. As you settled yourself in the shadows, curling up tight, you looked back to find him still watching you. “Just... Just tell me what you're going to do to me when you have time.”

“I don't have to tell you anything.”

“Then neither do I.”

And with that, you lead your head onto your arms and shut your eyes, not caring about whether the blue-eyed commander was still fixing you with his chilling stare.

You didn’t sleep.

Just thought.

Months ago, he'd handed you over and had left. He'd chosen his title and his friends over you - and whilst you understood that, with vital clarity, you couldn't help but despise it. You'd always wonder where his loyalties would lie, who he'd love more than you. You loved him more than your very self - you'd proved that, over and over. But at what point was he going to prove that he loved you, besides kissing you and whispering loving words in your ear?

You'd wanted him to look at you with silver lining his eyes, so that you could see how much he regretted leaving you. But he hadn't - he'd just left after you’d given him a hint as to your anger, once again. He may have been strong enough to hand you over, but not enough to see through the consequences of that action. That meant that he was a coward.

And that led you right back to where the problem was.

You should have asked for his apology, for some proof of his regret, instead of throwing yourself at him the first chance that you’d had. Kissing him had been a knee-jerk reaction, a bit of air after suffocation, a delicious lick of heat after being frozen. You'd seen him and had just acted.

But now, you were contemplating whether you should have just slapped him instead.

Not that it mattered.

He’d probably just run away again anyway.
The Change

“You arrogant, selfish son of a –“

“Is that really any way to speak to your headmaster, Miss Magnolia?”

Isabel caught herself before she had the chance to leap forward and break Pixis's nose. Instead, she wound the reigns of her horse tightly around her fist and pulled Strawberry away from his stallion. The school was now in sight, the tall walls creeping ever closer on the horizon. The sun was setting now, the sky transformed into a canvas of orange and yellow and pink.

“You're telling me,” she said, her voice dangerously close to breaking into a yell, “that we came all of this way for nothing?!”

“You've got Eren Yeager back,” Pixis replied, his eyes on his precious school. “Not to mention, Mikasa Ackerman and Armin Arlert. Surely you'd agree that they aren’t nothing?”

“I came for Y/N L/N; I will not be satisfied until I have her. I will not stand by while you allow that army to take her into their stupid army camp for no suitable reason... She is not a test tube, something to poked and prodded!” Isabel snarled, knowing that her emerald eyes were sparkling in pure wrath. Pixis turned his warm gaze towards her with a small smile, and she felt her anger boil in her stomach. “Don't you dare laugh at me.”

“I wasn't laughing,” Pixis said, although his irritating smile was still very present. “You haven't seen the girl yet, have you?”

“I - I wasn't sure that I was allowed,” Isabel stammered, her anger dropping like a stone in her gut. Pixis looked like Isabel had just told a very refreshing joke. “You thought that you had to wait for permission?”

Isabel was more than ready to curb her horse around and canter towards the carriage near the back of the retreating army that she'd been carefully keeping an eye on. Before she had the chance, however, Pixis spoke again. “Have you not thought about why she might be taken to the Scouts in the first place?”

“She knows things,” Isabel replied, the muscles of her lower back straining with the effort of her tensing, ready to head towards the topic of their conversation at a moment’s notice. “They’ll probably want to know everything in her head, the possible castles that the titans might head to.”

“We can interrogate her for information like that at our own school,” Pixis said, flatly. “Try again why they specifically want her.”

Isabel blinked. “She – she’s grown up around titans, maybe she knows more about the operation?”

Pixis smiled, but it was not a kind smile. It was the smile that you drew on a monster after being told to sketch your nightmares. “One could say that she knows the process intimately, I suppose. You’re getting warmer, Magnolia. Maybe I’ll only give you three months of detention after this.”

Isabel’s mouth went dry. “Do they think that she’s a titan, now? After everything that she did for us?”

Pixis sighed, and she felt a flash of victory in knowing that she’d gotten him to break. “They think
that in her time truly acting as the titan princess, one of the beasts took it upon themselves to truly turn her.”

“They wouldn’t! They thought that she was a titan, too – why would they doubt her?”

“Perhaps one of the titans saw too much humanity in her and thought to be cautious, and do the operation again,” Pixis shrugged, eyes resting once again on the school – the school that would not accept Y/N unless Isabel Magnolia had anything to say about it. “After all, you can’t exactly be made into a titan twice, can you?”

Without another word, she whipped Strawberry's head around - brutally, but efficiently - and galloped her mare to the back of the small army, causing a ruckus as the soldiers were forced to make way for her. Strawberry had grown in the year that Isabel had ridden her; she was now larger, broader in muscle. Her chestnut hide shone in the dying light, and her hooves delivered punches to the ground with such power that no soldier would dare go against her. That along with the fact that Isabel was riding her was enough to ensure that they went without confrontation.

So as Isabel neared the carriage, her hands started to shake. She bit her lip in frustration, wondering if the girl that she'd adored had really slipped into the insanity of a titan. For a while, Isabel just allowed Strawberry to trot in front of the carriage, doing nothing except thinking. She didn't flinch as Mikasa drew up her horse next to her and joined her in a few moments of silence.

Mikasa, too, had grown.

Not that any growth could be easily seen, from under the dirt and blood and a magnificent black eye. Bruises seemed to make up most of Mikasa’s skin colour, although not much skin could be seen – the girl had, it seemed, stolen half the army’s jackets and coats and piled them around herself.

“You can't prepare yourself for it,” Mikasa quietly said, breaking the silence that Isabel had just felt comfortable with. “No amount of time will make you better prepared for this meeting. Trust me.”

“I missed you,” Isabel said, her throat tight. “I’m sorry that you were left alone for months. If you had sent for us, we would have come.”

“I know that,” Mikasa said, her eyes low. “We both did. But we were careless, at first – the titans spotted our tracks too quickly and moved their base too often for us to think that sending a letter back would be useless – because by the time you’d gotten to one, they’d have moved on again. It was all we could do to keep up with them.”

“But you gave up months for that,” Isabel sighed, yearning to reach for the girl – but after months in the wilderness, she didn’t think Mikasa would appreciate the sudden touch. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mikasa said. “But I don’t doubt that you’ll blame yourself, anyway.”

Isabel pretended not to hear the last part, mostly because it was true. “I heard from Pixis that they think she’s a titan – that she was made into a titan during these months.” Mikasa’s mouth thinned, and Isabel marked it. “You believe it, too,” she said, her blood running cold. “How can you believe it?”

“You haven’t seen her yet,” Mikasa said. “I have. I know that she was a human during her stay with us – but only because I’ve seen true titans now. I’ve seen her as one.”

Isabel set her jaw, but there was something about the lack of judgement or pity in Mikasa’s eyes
that led her to an easy and quick forgiveness. “How did you manage seeing her like that?”

Mikasa swallowed, looking forward towards the school that she hadn't seen for a long time. “For the longest time, I thought that my only reason for being in that forest was to rescue Eren. He was the only thing that I thought about - my mind would constantly scream for him to be by my side again. For months, I was angry. And then I realized that it wasn't just him that I saw; it was her as well. Y/N also saved my life - I owed her a life debt.”

“We don't need anything from you,” Isabel murmured. “That day, when we saved you, that was just us being humans. We don't need thanks for that.”

Mikasa ignored her input entirely, shaking it off. “But you ask why I believe she’s a titan, because you do not have the capacity to believe it. You did not see how Y/N ran after the tracks that we'd left for her, just yesterday. For the first time in a long while, I felt scared. She was ahead of her entire group, flying down the hill like a wraith... And I just couldn't stop myself feeling like I should run from her. My every instinct screamed at me to flee - from her. I’d never felt the force to run quite that strongly before. I would have broken down if that other beast hadn't been there, mocking me. And I just felt useless – I’d spent so much time trying to get her and Eren that I felt cheated. She might have nodded when I asked her if she was human... But she also looked at one with madness when she first found us.”

Isabel felt her throat tighten and hardened her eyes, forbidding the tears from spilling over. “Is she really gone?”

Onyx eyes - eyes that were almost identical to Isabel's elder brother - met hers for a split second and then dropped, to the ground beneath their horses' hooves. “I won't answer that question for definite. There’s always two sides to every story – and for me, they are the moment that she found us, and the moment that she nodded. I've just got to find out which one to believe.”

Isabel dropped back then, allowing Mikasa to carry on riding her horse at a faster pace. Another shadow appeared at her side, but she didn't have to look up to see the face to know exactly who he was. “We were too late.” Levi said nothing as Isabel's iron-willed control slip and tears sprung free, dancing down her contorted face. “We were too goddamn late!”

“She's still there,” Levi said, slowly. “I don’t know how to explain it – but I believe her when she says that she’s human. She’s not entirely there, but I... I don’t know what to think about it all, just yet. But we’ve got to believe that she’s still there, Isabel. Don't give up on her yet.”

“What? Like you did?” Isabel snapped, unleashing the fury of her eyes as she pinned her stare at him. To his credit, Levi didn't shrink from her gaze. He met her head-on, and Isabel was stunned to see silver lining his eyes. “How did we let this much time pass? We could have prevented so much, and yet you stood by and did nothing. I pushed and trained and worked so hard to force my headmaster to consider my proposals; I've trained my body to its full ability; I have designed so many new tactics and formations that I've lost count. What did you do? I haven't heard from you in a year. You let Y/N go and never looked back - you are the right-hand of Erwin Smith, and you couldn't persuade him to make a move? That's utter crap. You could have done something, brother. And yet you now have the audacity to act like you love that girl and tell me to not give up on her.”

Isabel hardly knew where her frustration and harsh words were coming from. All she knew was that they even tasted horrible in her mouth as she spat them at the man she'd grown up with, attacking him constantly. But she couldn't stop them as Levi just sat atop his horse and took it.

Took her fury, because that was what brothers did.
Took it from her and left her empty – perhaps because he wanted to torture himself, like she had.

“Just leave,” Isabel said, much quieter now that her rant was finished. “You're used to doing that, aren't you?”

She didn't care what Levi looked like as she kicked Strawberry's sides and galloped away, leaving both her brother and the carriage far, far behind.

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“This is where we leave you,” Pixis said, inclining his head to Erwin. “I hope that the rest of your journey is safe.”

Armin didn't miss the way that Levi reigned his dark stallion too close to Erwin to be accidental. The raven-haired man looked destroyed; there was no other way to describe him. His face looked like it had aged many years in the span of a mere few hours, and his eyes were so empty that Armin nearly shuddered at the endlessness of them. But he still tipped his head back to murmur a raven's whisper to his commander, Erwin patiently leaning in towards him. Both students and soldiers were utterly silent as Levi breathed a few words to his commander, Pixis looking on with a sombre expression.

Erwin didn't reply to whatever Levi had said to him; he merely straightened on his horse, nodded imperiously to Pixis, and began leading his army away. Levi, however, curbed his horse with brutal skill so that Raven reared in protest, but still charged in the opposite direction. As the students watched the soldiers leave them at the great gate to their school, none of them whispered or muttered a farewell; there was just a rustle of movement as every single one of the students moved their arms into a salute. Armin didn't hesitate to follow their moves, placing his fist over his heart in silent thanks for the return of his brother.

Isabel sighed from his side. He chanced a look at her, not wanting to pry into what he was sure were swollen eyes and a despairing expression but was stunned to see her looking blankly at the army as it moved away - and that she hadn't saluted. Her emerald eyes were dull and bland, with none of the sparks that Armin remembered, even a year after not seeing them.

But then the carriage went past, and all salutes fell to the students' sides.

Everyone knew who was in the carriage, and that it was following the soldiers to their army base. A hush fell over the field, although Armin thought later that it was perhaps the loudest silence that he'd ever heard. Students either craned their necks trying to peer into the shadows within or dropped their gazes deliberately to the floor. But Isabel's breathing suddenly hitched as the carriage halted in its process, obviously waiting for something. The driver nimbly hopped off of her seat, legs obviously stiff from being in the same position all day and was then heaved onto another horse by her fellow comrade.

Levi Ackerman reined his own horse to the cart, the proud horse not going into the new bridle easily. But Armin, even from the distance that he was at, could see that Levi was not bothered by his horse's discomfort at all as he urged the horse forward - to the gates of the school.

“I thought the army were taking her,” Isabel whispered in a broken voice, quietly enough that Armin knew she had been talking to herself. But he couldn't help himself as he turned to her and smiled a quiet smile. “I thought he’d let them take her.”

“I don't think Levi would want that to happen,” he said, softly. Isabel bit her lip as a small smile graced her features despite the misery still firmly implanted in her eyes. “I think he'd want her to be
“And where he is not,” Isabel finished, with enough ruthlessness that Armin didn't dare inquire to her meaning. “Do you know if he's leaving or staying here?”

“If I did, I'd tell you,” he answered honestly, wondering at her reactions. Maybe it was the year away from people that had dulled Armin to knowing their hidden meanings, but Armin knew that his razor sharp intellect at reading people had faded. It was still there - unused and deep within his mind - but still present. He'd just have to work on it again.

As he turned again, the students were moving towards the now-open gate, behind the great walls that served as both cage and protection. Armin didn't know if he loved them or hated them, those walls of stone and brick. After months of living in constant danger, he was sure that he should adore the tranquillity of the walls and the peace within. But after a year of freedom, of always moving wherever that he wished, he was sure that he'd soon hate those walls.

But that didn't matter - not as Mikasa found her way to his side and smiled at him as they neared the gates.

“Let's go back, for now,” he said. Mikasa didn't say anything, but the glimmer in her eyes alerted him to the fact that she'd heard him, and more importantly, had understood his inner feelings. Isabel said nothing, her own thoughts obviously preoccupied by the carriage that was now being led into the grounds of the school along with them.

“For now,” Mikasa echoed.
The Dungeon

“I have no clue what we're going to do with you.”

You smiled at the floor, Pixis’s words music to your ears. “That's fine - no one ever does. I’d normally suggest believing me, but no one has done that in a while.” Your wrists and ankles still had chains on them, but you’d been dragged to a cell within the school where no one dared to go. No one had objected as you had been blindfolded and led quietly down steps and paths that you remembered very clearly – even without seeing them.

The sand paths.

You remembered them – the way that the sand crunched under your feet.

Every student had fallen silent; not one single voice whispered to their friend, nor one laugh erupted as they found themselves safe again. You'd only known that they'd been there from the ragged breathing that they couldn't hide, thinking that the measly sound would be lost the wind.

But once the blindfold had robbed you of your sight, your ears only became sharper as you found you depended on sound.

And now you’d been thrown into one of the cells in the damned dungeons that had always, no matter how far you’d run from them, followed you.

In dreams, in thoughts.

It wasn’t that you could see your surroundings, especially with the blindfold.

It was more that you could feel the prison’s coldness stabbing at your skin like needles, over and over. It was more that you could smell the blood and the moss, the rust.

It was more that you doubted your muscles would ever forget just how they failed to tense and perform.

You wrinkled your nose, mostly for Pixis’s benefit. You could almost taste blood from the heavy coppery smell hanging in the air. “I don't like this place,” you said, your voice unnervingly quiet. “Something bad happened to me here, as I’m sure you’re aware. Can’t you find nicer lodgings?”

You sensed the way that Pixis looked at you – with a tight face, eyes glaring. You imagined him leaning against the mossy wall opposite your cell. “You don't get to make requests, miss L/N.”

“You have to appreciate the fact that it’s a shock,” you said. “Going from royalty and being treated as such to suddenly being put into the dungeons.”

“It’s pure luck that you’re even here instead of following Erwin to his base,” Pixis said, and you frowned as the voice became vaguely disembodied – he was moving around. “For some reason, Levi Ackerman seems to think you may be human.”

“Oh?” The little word changed everything, but you didn’t want to give Pixis the chance to see just how much his sentence had floored you. “And I thought he was insisting that I was a titan.”

“He asked you if you were a titan,” Pixis corrected. “There is a difference.”

“The fact that he had to ask is an insult,” you insisted, noting how your voice was trying to put a
snarl behind your words and strangling it. “I gave up everything to save you all, and yet you treat me like dirt.”

“All true,” Pixis agreed cheerfully, and you cursed the fact that you were bound and couldn’t strangle him. “But did you give up your humanity? The scar on the back of your neck seems very fresh, after all.”

“Of course I had to act like I was a titan and had forfeited my humanity – are you a fool?”

“This may come as a shock to your system, miss L/N, but sass and attitude will not get you very far in this situation.”

“I am in a situation where everybody wants to either kill me or prod me with a needle. I thought sass was necessary.”

Pixis hummed. “Pray tell – what happened here that makes you so unhappy?”

You stiffened and closed your eyes – making no change to the state of your sight, but the movement was comforting, nonetheless. It wasn’t hard to think about it. “Feeling sadistic today, Headmaster? Did you seriously expect me to humour you?” There were a few beats until you realized that if you seriously kept the attitude and gave Pixis none of the answers, he’d leave. He’d leave you alone in the dark.

You decided to humour him. “I remember darkness and blood; I remember smelling it, feeling it, seeing it everywhere. Darkness and blood, together, were here.” You jolted for a second, pulling at your chains as you adjust the leggings that you were wearing, drawing them up over your knees. You didn’t have to see them to know what lay on your skin there. The scars decorating the S/C skin there were peppery, marking exactly where you had fallen and skidded. You could feel Pixis watching as you brushed your fingertips over the scars, feeling the difference in texture, the dust of a memory beginning to stir...

But you shut it down so fast, a reflex reaction, that you almost gasped in surprise. You clawed the memory away from Pixis with claws of iron and thorns, protecting it from the one with eyes of a drunkard. Not yours to see, you silently snarled at him, not yours, not yours.

“I remember pain and terror,” you diverted from the story, your eyes turned inward at the entity holding your memories. “And then I remember flashing silver and onyx eyes. The rest of the story, I passed out. I cannot remember.”

“And there is no other reason for your lack of memory?” Pixis asked.

“Becoming a titan wouldn’t affect the memory,” you scoffed. “Becoming a titan is becoming a different version of yourself. If I were a titan, I would be without the feeling of love and rationality. I would have destroyed the walls of sanity. A titan is the shadows of your unconscious mind given flesh and muscle. They’d still be one and the same as the human form, but instead of love and compassion there is only hate and insanity. A titan’s thoughts are a mess; there is a thirst for blood and a wish for freedom; some beast told me that it was a song of rage and hatred in their blood.”

“Awfully specific,” Pixis commented.

“Don’t try and catch me in your traps,” you said. “If I were a titan, I’d readily agree that I was mad. My thoughts would be madness given a physical thing, and it would drive you insane.”

“Are you sure that you’re not there already?” Pixis asked, and you would have thought, initially,
that it was a teasing question. But his voice was a knife, and it would readily stab you if you let the sass slip even a little. “You seem pretty insane.”

“It doesn’t matter that my thoughts are rivers of constant changes, clashing and dancing and merging and drowning. It just matters that I can swim.”

“And what happens when you get tired of swimming?” Pixis turned on his heel, let out a sigh that communicated his extreme tiredness, and stalked away. You stayed perfectly still as you listened to his echoing footsteps fade into nothingness. Then there was no sound except your own breathing.

Pixis’s presence had reduced to nothing but a flickering shadow, but you weren’t about to wait for those shadows to catch up to you. You ducked your head so that your shoulder could slowly budge the blindfold away from its smothering embrace on your eyes, until you could bite the material and yank it away. Soon, it was bunched around your neck, and you had sight again. You stretched your limbs as far as you could with the restraints and assessed the different patches of floor surrounding you. After selecting the least dirty stone that you could, you sat precariously on your heels as you breathed steadily.

Breathing was essential when danger was nearby.

“He’s going to kill me, somehow,” you mused to yourself, your own voice comforting in the dead silence of the dungeon. “He thinks I’m mad, and he knows madness better than anyone. I’m dangerous, and he knows that he can’t keep me down here forever. That’d be a waste of time, and of me.”

Naturally, talking to yourself would indeed be the first hint towards madness – but you needed the sound of your voice to kill that incessant silence.

You mused about what, exactly, to do. You had the vague memory of a plan – a plan that you’d spent months building, in the titan’s keep. Here was a golden opportunity to take it, to take those shreds of a plan and make them powerful.

The girl who’d given herself up on the battlefield – Pride incarnate – she was dead. Pride might have stayed in this dungeon and patiently waited for Pixis or Levi to get her out, fearful of the consequences of breaking out.

You were not that girl any longer.

Had killed her yourself.

You clenched your fist and seethed, stopping your babbling thoughts before they got any more poetic or dangerous. It was this dungeon – dark, forgotten places would always be a weakness that you hid within yourself, a little voice of fear in the back of your mind that you wouldn’t let become powerful. But it would still be there, that fear. Pride wouldn’t have let that fear become any bigger – would have rather died than let any fear become bigger than herself. She would perhaps stay in this dungeon just to stubbornly prove to herself and others that she could – that she was afraid of the dungeon no longer.

You, on the other hand, were frantically sinking into a panic that had you musing on the differences between the girl you had been and the girl that you were. You had to get out.

The corridor outside your cell was dark; the meagre candles that decorated the otherwise sparse walls were flickering weakly, and you doubted that the guards would care about refuelling the wax. You had to make do with what time you had left. You turned your attention to your chains –
the heavy weight around your limbs that you very much hated.

Stepping through your chains a couple of times neatly, you had the links twisted together in such a way that soon they were protesting. You gritted your teeth as you pulled on your wrists in the same direction, the weak chains twisting in protest as you exerted your strength. Any moment now, they'd brea-

The chain made a satisfying creak as just one link broke. The warped bit of rusted metal dug into your arms, but you found that you didn't particularly care as the restraints soon went slack and fell to the floor. Your hands were free - bruised, dirty and bloody - but still free. You repeated the process with the chain at your ankles, hopping neatly out of them once you had heard it break, and then stamped on the metal for good measure.

Grabbing one of the broken links, you stood on it and leveraged it so that it was as straight as you could get it. Weaving your arms through the bars of your cell, you used the cold iron to poke around the lock, hoping that you could get it just right -

“And what, pray tell, do you think that you're doing?”

“I personally thought it was obvious, to be honest,” you answered, withdrawing your attempts and gripping the bit of iron tightly. You cocked your head and grinned a snake's smile in response to the tigress's grin that Isabel Magnolia was giving you, just a few meters away. She was shaking like a leaf caught in the wind, as though she'd ran an impossible distance. You hadn't heard her approach - how stealthy must her footsteps have been? “I thought I'd attempt baking meringues.”

“A wide variety of ingredients you have down here;” Isabel agreed, nodding towards the moss and grime decorating the wall beside her. She smiled so widely that her bottom lip had split, even as tears appeared along her green eyes.

“Well, you know what they say,” you whispered, no longer able to control the happiness as it welled up in your throat and made your voice sound scratchy and dry. “When in doubt, bake a meringue.”

“Oh my god,” Isabel sobbed, tears spilling over even as she snorted, “you're insufferable.”

“But I'm here,” you croaked, joining her in her sobs. You didn't dare reach for her through the bars, not entirely trusting her knowledge of your titan-human situation. “Surely that counts for something?”

“Oh, god, yes.” Her voice was lovely, even when it rose and dropped with her sobs and heaving breaths. “It counts for everything.”

Her hand reached for yours through your bars, and you sobbed harder as her warm hand gripped yours tight. Her hand was a tether, steadfast and immortal. You felt the callouses beneath your fingertips as you gently traced patterns with your fingers, even as they turned numb from her iron grip. She'd been training - so hard and for so long, if the age of the rough parts on her hands were anything to go by.

You both sunk to the ground, sobbing your hearts out, neither of you letting go of the other's hand. You didn't know how long you both sat there, in the dark and dingy dungeon cell, crying as though both of your hearts would break. But then you decided that you really didn't care.

Time didn't matter.

Isabel was here, and so were you.
You were together.

Time really didn't matter.

*I*

“I’m not the titan,” you said, your voice breaking the silence that had long since settled across both you and Isabel. Your voice was horrible - dry, scratchy, hoarse - but you were just thankful that it hadn’t broken back into the snarls and hisses that it was used to. “In case you feel that you have to kill me or anything.”

“I’ve fought the urge to kill you for a long while now, Y/N. Giving in now would mean all that hard work of coping with you would go to utter waste.”

Isabel leaned back, eyeing you warily. “I think you’ve got it wrong,” you winked, brushing the dust and grease away from your skirts, “I was the one who mostly wanted to kill you. You got me up at ungodly times in the morning, I recall.”

“Semantics,” Isabel shrugged, and sniggered at the feigned look of outrage that you gave her. “First things first - you’re not staying in this dungeon.” You raised an eyebrow as Isabel eyed the grimy walls in disgust. As she glanced to the broken chains around you, you blinked sheepishly at her uncanny knack of reading your thoughts and swung open the cell door – you’d felt the lock click open the moment that Isabel had interrupted. Isabel merely looked at the open door and roared with laughter. “I can't believe that they thought that they could hold the great Y/N L/N in here. It's not even top security - oh how your pride must sting.”

You didn't let yourself react to the words other than another wolfish grin, given mindlessly so that Isabel wouldn't think too much of it. It was just a mere word – “pride”. Was there truly any pride to be had anymore? What good was swaggering around the halls when you knew that every single person around you would be doubting your humanity? Would be questioning whether you had a monster hidden in your veins? What good was sneering at other's when they failed if, when it really mattered, you had failed in the very spectacular of ways?

It was no good. You were worthless; you were weak.

And perhaps the fact that you wanted to get out of the dungeon proved it.

“I - I missed you.” Isabel said into the darkness, leading you through the matrix of corridors. “Every day. There was barely an hour that passed when I didn't think about you or what I was going to do to get you back.”

“How long was I there?” You asked.

You’d lost count of the days, of the weeks. You knew it had been months – longer, perhaps – but the exact number evaded you. The hours had bled into each other and had merged into a mess. Isabel didn’t hesitate to answer. “Five months, two weeks and four days.”

“I need you to understand,” you blankly began, your breathing easing as Isabel opened a door that led to a staircase. Stairs upwards meant out of the dungeon. “I need you to understand that I am deliriously happy to see you right this moment, and I’m glad that you’re alright.” Isabel paused on the stair before continuing, not daring to look back. “I need you to understand that I need time to sort out my emotions about all of you.”

“What’s there to sort out?” Isabel was immediate on her voice becoming more kind, more helpful.
It only made what you were about to say sound crueler.

“The truth is, I’m furious at you,” you said, the chaos in your mind quietened for a mere moment. “You left me to those things for five months? Without trying to get me back? Every day, I prayed for rescue. Of course, you weren’t meant to. You were meant to stay here, safe and happy. But I needed one of you to come for me – and you didn’t. You did what you were supposed to, and for that, I know I shouldn’t be angry at you for. But I feel pretty damn abandoned. And so, I think it’s best for me to say that I didn’t.”

“You didn't what?” Isabel lightly said - too casual, too high-pitched to be anything but a calculated move. She didn't want you to know how much your statement had jarred her; she was trying to keep the feeling of dread from her bones, wanting nothing more than for you to concede to her silent wish of having this confrontation later.

So you took a deep breath. “Miss you. I didn't miss you.”

Isabel stopped walking a bit ahead of you. If you focused, you could almost hear how her breaths shifted - how she took a little gasp, as though her heart had snapped, and then how she let out a puff of air that mimicked a sob. But when Isabel spoke, you almost weren't prepared for her voice - the blunt, cool and cutting edge that danced from her lips.

“So we really going to do this now, Pride?”

“Don't you call me that name,” you snarled. For the first time, you were truly glad of your ordeal spent at the titan castle. Your throat had gotten so used to that animalistic snarl that the sound of it was truly spectacular - almost a low purr, a promise of violence - but so guttural that it couldn't belong to anyone else other than a monster.

Isabel slightly looked over her shoulder - but it was enough so that you could see the ice that was in her eyes. It shocked you - Isabel had always been fire, pure passion that cackled with power, the fury that she danced with every day. But the pure evil that was in her eyes right now... That was enough to stop even your heart, broken and shattered as it was.

“What would you like me to call you?”

Despite your very gut telling you to stop - that this was Isabel, your dearest friend, the one that you loved most - you shoved down all traces of being a human and adopted the titan within you. For the activities that this body was used to. You flexed your fingers into a claw-like fashion and grinned, licking the sharp canines so that they shone in the dim light; you cocked your head so that your E/C eyes shimmered with power and lust and hatred.

“Tell me,” you purred in a violence-lathered voice, “what would you call the monster underneath your bed?”

Isabel’s eyes widened in hatred - a look that once upon a time, you would have wept upon seeing - and she paused. You braced yourself; the pause was not because she was confused, or because she was figuring out what to say. No, it was worse than that. Isabel paused because she had the power to be cruel - and she was debating whether or not to spit the words that would surely haunt you when all of this was over and you were dead.

But you craved to feel something beneath all of the numbness. You needed to hear those words - you needed them to break you so much that you tipped back your head and smiled at Isabel in that little irritating smile, the smile that promised a challenge and a snarky underestimation. It had pissed off more than half the male titans in the mansion - and you knew that maybe, just maybe, it would push her off the edge.
It did.

“Princess.”

Silence. Load, roaring silence.

“I call her Princess.”

“Careful,” you croon, passing her in the corridor and stepping lightly up the steps to the door, hoping to hell she didn't notice how suddenly, your eyes were very damp. You’d bared your soul – you’d told her your emotions, the fact that you were well aware some of it was needless and that you’d needed time to sort through it all. But here she was, so alike flame that your own blood shifted into fire itself. “This princess can bite.”

“I'll bet.”

Those two words were enough to send ice spearing through your blood again, cleaving through the deafening silence in your head. You couldn't stop yourself as you hissed, “what did you just say to me?”

“I see that ring on your finger,” Isabel spat. “I know that you're married to that filth. What's the betting of you being pregnant to another little beast, I wonder? How could you let yourself be bound to a titan, Princess? How dare you let yourself be taken like that?”

“You're furious,” you said to her wonderingly, your voice lovely, calm, serene. “You're utterly full of rage and hatred - not because you let me be taken. Not because I was trapped and had to become a monster for five months, forced to do despicable things in my name in order to merely stay alive after saving your lives. You're not even furious that you did nothing at all in these past months to get me back, to rescue me!”

There it was. You knew that you'd be able to feel something in the unending numb - and here it was. That boiling wrath that you needed, that you breathed, in order to give yourself a motive.

“No, Isabel,” you said, your hand reaching the door handle. “You're mad because you think that I'm married to another being other than your brother - Levi.” You spared her one more glance as you wrenched the door open and kept your face blank as you dealt the final blow.

“God, you're pathetic.”

*

“It's strange, isn't it?”

You didn't open your eyes to the voice - you knew exactly whose it was.

It was late - night had long since fallen, and the darkness was pleasant enough. It was a cloudless night - allowing the half-moon to grace the sky with its shining presence and allow it to see the dance of the stars around it. You had the perfect view, of course - because after you'd shut the door to the dungeon and crept out the library, you'd instantly known that the secret garden on the roof of the school was where you'd just needed to be.

And so you'd lightly made your way to the roof, thinking idly about your clothes - how the dress, just two days ago, had been pretty enough that you’d thought it a perfect contrast to your mother’s. It was still fine enough - and heavy enough that it kept the chill of the night away. You'd curled into the bench, not wanting a blanket or anything foreign to touch you and had tried to sleep.
Until now.

Until him.

You didn't reply to him - not using your voice. Instead, you opened your eyes and dully looked at him with the question shimmering in the E/C irises instead. Levi looked well enough - he'd changed into a new shirt, but had left the top few buttons undone, revealing a smooth chest beneath. His hair was the same as it always had been - the black undercut dipping endearingly into his onyx eyes just enough to look tousled.

“I think it's strange, at least,” Levi said quietly, but not weakly. He carefully made his very deliberate way towards you, every movement slow and controlled - and although you felt a flicker of ire at the way he treated you like an animal, you could understand it. And worse still, you appreciated the slow and predictable way he moved. You liked the fact that this, this right here, you could understand.

“That strange feeling when you're about to cry, and yet you really don't want to - I hate it.” Levi had reached you, and he settled himself next to you - a healthy distance away, you noted. Not because he was scared of you; no, Levi likely thought that he could probably take you down without a single problem. Levi stayed away because he didn't want to scare you with touch, with his scent, with the sound of his voice being so near.

“It's the way that your throat closes up and dries almost instantly... Or maybe the way that you can feel the tears in your eyes. Tears are so heavy when they rest in your eyes - have you noticed? Your eyes will burn, not because of the tears themselves, but because you don't want to blink. If you blink, the tears overflow and you lose.”

“It is a strange thing,” you agreed, and immediately regretted it - your voice had become so croaky that it guttered up your indeed-dry throat. “But did you really come here to talk about tears and the way that I'm about to cry?”

“It's my garden,” Levi pointed out. You laughed - damn you, you laughed - and shuddered as you felt the sound tumble out of you. Your skirts danced in the light air of the night, and you gazed at the stars. “You're right, though... I didn't come here to talk about tears.”

“No one ever talks about the tears,” you said, softly. “No one wants to talk about tears - because if you talk about tears, then that means that you have to talk about the reasons behind them. And no one wants to hear all of your problems, because they have their own.”

You both fell silent after that, watching the flowers move in the light breeze, and the way that the lights from the dorms flickered off and on as students moved to go to bed, blissfully unaware or ignorant of the war going on in the world around them. You envied them and that empty ignorance - you really did.

“So if you're not here to talk about tears,” you whispered, “what are you here for, Levi Ackerman?”

His eyes flickered to meet yours, and you were struck by the stars reflected in his eyes. Somehow, mirrored in his black irises, the stars looked so much more impressive.

“I am here so that once your tears start appearing, you know that you're not alone.”

You spent your first night back in the company of humans a little strangely.

It was spent under a lovely night sky, with the stars and moon watching, wrapped in ripped clothes
that had once been a vibrant colour that signified royalty. It was spent curled into a mossy bench, with scents of all kinds of flowers wafting through the air.

It was spent sobbing your little, broken human heart out, with the onyx eyes of a human looking on.
You were not a fool.

Or at least, you prided yourself on not being one.

You weighed your options carefully as you stepped into your shower, cranking the heat to the highest setting and allowing the scalding jet of water to sear your skin, already burning from the moment you’d entered into the girl’s dormitories.

You couldn’t say how long you’d spent on that rooftop garden merely crying – hours felt too little for the amount of energy that you’d spent on allowing your emotions to rip free. Levi had stood nearby at first – perhaps waiting for words to find their way from your mouth instead of the gasping brought down by the sobbing.

He’d understood, after a while, that words were not going to have a part to play in their time at that point. You weren’t ready for words and sparring and boasts – he knew that well enough. If you two went at it, it would most likely cause damage rather than anything else. You had become something else – something jaded and inherently cruel. And he didn’t know which weapon to throw at you, meaning that one of you would probably have broken if you had dared try and talk about your feelings.

Feelings were sickening things with no cure; you almost preferred the titan compound, where the only feelings that mattered were anger, pride and lust. You could deal with all of those well enough; could fall into snarls and the baring of teeth as easily as falling asleep.

But happiness was such a tender thing; you didn’t want to shatter by doing anything stupid.

And yet that was your speciality.

The time for words would come later. Would come on a different night, perhaps.

Once Levi had realized that, he had gone to lie on his back on a grassy mound below the canopy of trees that he’d cared for. You couldn’t have said how long he had stayed there, just listening to the sounds of your cries. But there had been a moment where you’d been looking at him through puffy eyes and wet eyelashes, and just attuned the rhythm of your breaths to match his. When they had become easy and life had seemed manageable again, you’d known that he’d fallen asleep.

It was at that point that you had stolen away, creeping silently towards the door on footsteps made from shadows. It was easy once you’d shut the door behind you, knowing that the heavy wood would bar your next few steps from his senses. You’d strolled – without a light, on pure memory alone – downstairs and out of the mansion’s double doors, careful to walk on the grass beside the sand path leading to the girl’s dormitories.

Your room was the same as it had always been.

It wasn’t comforting to see the old lock that had been picked and destroyed too many times to be useful, somehow. Or to think that Annie’s room was across from yours, likely in the same state as yours – left, ready and waiting. The other girls had been moved upstairs along with all of the other second years – and yet your room had been left on the first floor, uninhabited.

You wondered if Isabel still drew pictures.
You stopped that thought there as you twisted the shower's nozzle, allowing slightly cooler water to cascade down your shivering body. Steam and warm water were always the best place to think - and you needed that more than anything.

Staying would mean that people would begin to scrutinize you and every movement that you made – you would have to act like every inch of you was human. The slightest hint of a snarl could and would probably lead to you being back in chains.

If they even let you out of the chains.

Pixis must have realized that you weren’t still in the dungeons – and Levi hadn’t seemed surprised to see you free on his rooftop. But Levi would always be a grey area where you were concerned, you supposed.

Staying here would mean that you were in danger for every second; it would be a cage. A cage dressed in school uniform and familiar faces, but a cage nonetheless.

You had never taken well to cages.

And if you allowed yourself to be chained here, it would never be over. Annie would never stop hunting for you; you knew that in your very self. She would follow you to hell and then further, and then help you to rule wherever you so desired. It wouldn’t matter that Orion would consider diverting her, distracting her.

She’d follow, and when she found you… You had no doubt that she’d bring carnage.

You turned off the water and did your best to shake the water from your skin as you stepped from the steaming darkness of the shower, towelling your hair with the one clean towel that had been carefully folded on a shelf. It was too hot to care about throwing on clothes - and the droplets left on your body cooled rapidly, charming you enough to stay damp.

But as you stepped into your room, you saw a figure waiting for you and whirled into action.

It was a few seconds before your mind caught up to the situation, to see that your foot was blurring in a vicious kick that would no doubt break the recipient's jaw. But you saw a flash of red and deliberately twisted too harshly at the last second, sending yourself crashing over to the opposite side of the room. Your body complained immediately as your back smacked against the edge of your chair, your limbs sprawling everywhere as you lost control.

As you sat in a crumpled heap of pain, you glared up at the figure before you. “Didn't anyone ever tell you not to sneak up on anyone attending a murder school?”

“I took my chances,” Isabel drawled, looking down her nose at you. “And as you’re currently sprawled naked in front of me, without a weapon and completely unbalanced after a shoddy kick - that missed, in case you hadn't noticed, I’d say that my chances were pretty good.” She was wearing a short top that hugged her midriff and shorts that barely covered what was considered decent - but then you remembered that you were naked and were in no position to think about other people's state of dress.

You stood - forbidding yourself to become mortified at your own nudity, forbidding the blush to rise to your cheeks as you deliberately made your way to your drawers and pulled on a similar attire to Isabel - a bra and shorts. As you fastened the bra and turned to face Isabel, you almost wanted to laugh at her scandalized expression. “Stunned at such immodesty?” You taunted, turning your back to her as you looked out the window to the moonless night. “Call me a whore and get out
already - I don't care.”

“Fine,” Isabel answered shortly. You caught her blushing glance and squinted at her.

“Why did you even come in here?” You asked, trying to sneer as you winced from the ache flaring at the base of your back.

“I normally come here when things get – too much.”

You heard from the way that her voice dried out halfway that Isabel had never even meant to tell you that much, but before you could decide whether or not to be mad at her for before, she’d turned on her heel to leave. She threw a rare unguarded glance behind at you – with wide, hurting eyes – and shut your door quietly behind her as she presumably went back to her room on the floor above.

You bit your lip, hugging yourself despite the unbearable heat, and looked behind you at the door again. For a while, you pondered on why she’d looked so stunned, so pitying of you. But then your eyes fastened onto the mirror that a year ago, you'd hung on the back of the door.

And you saw yourself exactly as she'd seen you.

With the entire skin of your back carrying the evidence of you being flayed alive - the scars that were both white and red, old and recent, making a map of complicated and lengthy roads across your body. You hadn't had that many scars as you'd left as a human.

As entirely human.

You made your decision fairly easily after that thought.

Now was the perfect time to leave – to avoid the cages and being chased and everything in between. Pixis would likely still think that you were in the dungeon, and the moment you made your reveal you would be carefully watched for every following second.

Now was the only chance you’d get.

Hurriedly towelling off the few droplets of water that you’d hesitated to dry from your body before, you made your way back to the dresser. You noted the lack of dust, the careful cleaning of the picture frames above it, and disregarded it as you instead shoved yourself into the black clothes folded in the various drawers – the tunic, the tight trousers, the cloak. The rags of the dress sat in a rumpled heap in the corner of your room as you inwardly cooed at your feet fitting into boots that came up to your knees, marvelling at the fact that they still fit.

Dresses were nice.

But black clothes that practically screamed that you were danger embodied?

They were infinitely better.

Ripping open a floorboard was next on your few short tasks. Sweet wrappers were littered in the crevices - you couldn't help that sometimes you'd just needed sugar, or that your friends had crashed and had brought a bag of candy. But beneath the colourful little things were what you'd been looking for.

Knives and daggers were kept sharp in a fur-lined box, and you didn't hesitate to shove the silver blades down your boots, tucked into your pants, slipped underneath your tunic. You'd miss your
daggers, with their jewels and wicked blades, but you’d had to throw them away. Maybe that guard had managed to find them, if he’d actually obeyed you. Maybe one day, you’d hunt for him and take them right back.

That was what freedom meant.

Because this world was no longer yours; you had shrunk too small, too insignificant, to care about this world anymore. You wanted out, you wanted nothing but freedom and perhaps a full stomach. And you thought that the world owed you enough for the months of mental torture that it would be okay to steal and wrench the things that you wanted from others.

Once you’d been armed to the teeth, you quietly placed the floorboard back in place and took one last cursory glance around your room before grabbing a satchel and throwing things in. A blanket, clothes, a whetstone, a blank book. Anything that caught your eye went in.

Then you crept from your window into the dark night. Your fingers gripped the edge of your window as you slowly lowered yourself to the ledge, before gaining a decent handhold and swinging your body cleanly down from the first floor. The grass below your window was not the best landing, but at this point you didn’t particularly care. Your pack was heavy on your shoulders – but it was far better than the weight of shackles or a crown.

You headed in the rough direction of the stables, weaving behind tree trunks to stay tucked out of sight from any student stupid enough to be up at this time looking out their window. It was a fool’s hope - to hope that your beloved horse would be there, ready for you. But it was still a hope - she was yours by right and triumph and loyalty... And you were going to take her.

Sliding the door open to the stables, you fought off the gagging that the smell caused to erupt in your gut. Sweat and hay and worse. You took one shaking step towards the stalls, then another - until you were lightly jogging down the path, looking right and left like a mad person. The horses that were awake didn’t bother to react to you – but you steadily got more frantic as you approached the last stall on the right. You were practically begging any higher power that you could to let Skira be in the last stall - but no. Your grey, warrior-hearted mare was not here. Instead, you looked into the faintly cautious eyes of Raven.

The black horse was huge. A year ago, you'd foolishly challenged him and his rider to a race - you'd never forget how much your heartbeat had fluttered as you felt the hooves of this horse punch the ground with a fury. He was Levi's horse.

You grinned as you reached for the saddle.

***

The best thing about the night was that riding a black stallion meant invisibility, if you were careful enough.

The massive gate would have been a problem – but guards were dozing, which you were thankful for. The gate that had welcomed you into the school had been left slightly open – perhaps preparing for the guards doing patrols outside of the gates to come back in.

Focussing on keeping things out, though, meant that they were not focussed on anything trying to get out.

They weren't expecting a monster to burst out of the gates and canter away from the school, blending into the black of the night easily.
You let your cloak fall from your head, accepting that the wind would have pushed it back anyway. The air was cold and biting, and so you let your eyes water and felt glad for the excuse to cry. Raven was entirely different from the horse that Skira had been - where she had been fast and light and spirited, this was a horse of discipline and power and unbridled strength. Riding him was glorious.

You could just begin to see the light creeping up from a long sleep along the lip of the horizon.

Freedom meant this, you decided.

After months trapped with monsters, you learned some things. Some of them scary – how to get beaten to the dirt, how to take lashings, how to accept punishments. But they allowed you to learn the real lesson – to recognise the monsters.

It wasn’t your fault that monsters lived inside humans as well as titans.

You still cantered a stolen horse into the abyss of a sunrise in utter silence.

***

The world was going to shit, and Levi Ackerman could not care less.

People were screeching at each other in the corridors, running around after the teachers that were lucky to be alive after everything had been said and done. Weapons of all shapes and sizes were to be seen - maces, short swords, bows and arrows - Levi even had one hand on one of his twin swords, just to reassure himself that the blades were still there.

He could barely keep himself still; every nerve within his body was smouldering, begging to move and fly and touch. But he kept himself still next to a door, cloaked in shadow, watching the chaos that was the school's corridor. He could not bring himself to care about the noise and the dirt that the students were trekking everywhere.

It was just one of those days.

Of course, as soon as the alarm had shattered all peace and quiet at four in the morning, Levi had resigned himself to the fact that indeed, it would be one of those days. As Pixis's voice had crackled to life and had commanded everyone to get up and towards their tutor room, right now, he had merely groaned and rolled over.

His fingers had shaken as he hadn't dared open his eyes, his ears searching for the breathing of someone else next to him. Soon, his hand had reached across the mossy floor of the rooftop garden, seeking for the body of another. He'd needed her to be there - her warm skin underneath his fingertips. He'd dreamed about a day where perhaps they could sleep next to each other, and he would be able to wake her up with light fingertips that barely grazed her skin - she would have probably woken up the moment he had anyway, her hearing so attuned to the steadiness that would have been his breathing.

Today, it seemed, was not that day.

For he'd woken up on that rooftop garden, had bolted upright and had panicked upon not immediately seeing her form anywhere... And she hadn't been there. She'd gone.

Her tears last night had undone him. She hadn't looked at him - just the sky and the land around her. He'd needed her to look at him - damn him, he'd nearly gotten on his knees and begged her to look at him. Levi Ackerman, Humanity's Strongest - considering getting on his knees and weeping
at the feet of the Princess of Titans. But then she'd let out a little noise - a gasp, a sigh, a groan - and he'd seen the tears glitter their way down her face.

That damned face.

It had struck him damn near stupid when he saw her, first, on the land outside the titan's mansion. He'd only had a few moments to register that it was her, and that Erwin needed him to take care of that brown-haired menace if he wanted to get to her. Her face. Those eyebrows that could easily quirk up in amusement, that nose that would scrunch in disgust, those lips that could either charm or insult someone depending on her mood.

That damned, beautiful face.

But tears had graced those cheeks as she started to sob, as she began to remember what she'd been through. He'd almost broken, in that moment - had almost reached for her, to tuck her into his arms, to whisper whatever he could into her ear. But it had been months - months where she'd been violated in her own mind, months when someone else's touch might have touched her and stroked her and kissed her.

She had still been wearing that iron ring.

And so he hadn't broken - he'd stayed solid and as iron as that ring on her finger, until somehow he'd ended up lying on the mossy, springy floor and telling himself to close his eyes for just a few seconds. He'd fallen asleep to the sound of her cries, hating himself and loving her and questioning everything.

And then he'd been awoken by a stupid bell and an announcement from a stupid man telling him to prepare for a stupid, stupid day. He'd hurried to his tutor room, scanning everywhere for a familiar head of H/C hair, needing her to be somewhere, with anyone.

"What the hell is going on?" He'd demanded of the teacher, who had cast an eye over him in disapproval before addressing the class already seated at their desks.

"This is a matter of utmost importance," she'd started, slamming her hands onto her desk and effectively making everyone jump. Levi took the notice and had stepped lightly towards his desk. Petra, seated to his right, tried her best to meet his eyes. He ignored her as he kept all of his attention on the teacher in front. "You are all well aware that we were put in charge of a titan hostage and were tasked with keeping it safe and alive and, most importantly, here. It seems that it has gotten away, and now the entire school is being tasked with finding it."

It had been an effort not to spring up immediately and head for the door - but Petra had gripped his arm, hard, and his impatience had stalled enough to be incredulous at her.

"The first years are to proceed to the west, towards the open land. The second years will be heading towards the north, towards the wooded areas. The third years - you - will be heading due east, towards the titan territory. Since we have the most talented and experienced riders in this year, I trust you'll understand why we've been tasked with covering the most vital area. The Survey Corps will be given an urgent message and will cover the south, where their city is. We cannot let this titan get away, and I trust you understand why. Arm yourselves and be at the stables within ten minutes. Dismissed."

Petra hadn't let go of his arm as she had stood up and dragged him with her. He yanked his arm away from her touch with a snarl, earning him a questioning look from Eld and Gunther as he did so. He did not deign to look at Petra's face as he followed the urgent, heaving crowd from the
classroom and into the chaos on the other side of the doors.

Levi was already armed - twin swords in their scabbards at his side - and he turned abruptly to Eld. "We're not going east."

It was a mark of how deeply Eld trusted him and his leadership that he said nothing besides, "then where are we heading, Heichou?"

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"We're heading south?!" Petra asked, her voice betraying the shock at the change of plans. Levi groaned at her hand once again finding its way onto his wrist and gripping it slightly. "Why? They need us at the east!"

Levi pushed his way to the front of the line at the queue at the stables. All first years had already departed, an insult to the slowness to the second and third years - but it meant less people for them all to deal with now. "She would not have gone east."

Petra glanced behind her at Eld and Gunther, both of whom merely shrugged and dashed to find their horses. A nervous looking third year who Levi distantly recognized came up to him, shifting on her feet and looking everywhere but at his face. "I'm sorry, Heichou... But your horse -"

"What about him?" Levi snapped, his eyes surely flashing their fury at the delay. He wanted his stallion now, he wanted to be on the back of that horse and flying towards where he wanted to go.

"He - he's gone," the girl said, clearly and desperately. "He was here last night, but his stall was left open when I got here - he isn't here!"

A dumb blankness spread through Levi's veins. In a few moments, the blankness transcended into fury. He knew exactly who had taken his precious horse. "That damn girl is going to pay in a thousand ways," he cursed, causing Petra's eyes to spark in alarm.

"He doesn't mean you!" She rushed to calm the third year, who had taken a step back. "What he means - where is Skira?"

"She's out the back," the stable girl replied, "she doesn't like to be enclosed in a small space when its dark, so I leave her outside at night." The girl caught the look on Levi's face before taking the hint and running away. Levi took a second to stop being furious about the theft of his horse to gape at Petra, who made quick work of saddling her brown stallion.

"Don't look so surprised," she snapped, her spirit fuelling her irritation. "And stop threatening random people. You'll make them think that you're a monster."

Levi couldn't think of anything to say to her until Skira was led up to him, the grey mare obviously irritated and uncomfortable. He grabbed her reigns from the hands of the third year, who promptly ran off to help the other third years who were left. She snorted, lifting her head away from him in an obvious stance of disapproval.

"Listen here, you piece of dirt," Levi snapped, yanking on the reigns to get her to look at him. "You let me ride you just this once, you hear? Otherwise we might lose her again. We will lose her again."

The horse, of course, couldn't understand him - but perhaps she understood his desperation, for she allowed him to lift himself into the saddle and canter her out of the school gates, with his team hard on his heels.
"Why are we going south?" Petra again found her way to his side, shouting over the wind. They were pushing their horses hard, their breaths already laboured as they flew their way through the barely lit plains.

"She would not have gone any other way," Levi said, leaning low over Skira's neck. She was shorter than Raven - she was not as much as a powerhouse as his faithful steed. But what she lacked in power, she made up for in pure speed. "She's still human, and she still hates herself for the titan part - she'd never even consider going back to the titan territory."

"What about north and west? If she'd wanted to escape for a quiet life, a life in hiding, she'd have definitely gone to the abandoned areas."

Levi snapped his gaze across to the amber-eyed woman at his side. "Can you really see Pride, the most stubborn piece of work that Survey Corps has ever seen, going into hiding? The world to the north and west is too empty, too small for the person she is."

"That girl is no longer Pride," Petra said quietly, but not weakly. The attack in it was obvious enough that Levi could feel his anger widen his eyes at her. "Don't you look at me like that; the girl you knew is broken and gone. There is no point trying to hold onto her."

"Pride is still within her," Levi bit back.

"No," Petra said, not willing to bend. "She killed that girl herself; she killed her quickly and cleanly, on the day that we gave her up. She became a new person, a nameless girl that we've never met and probably don't want to. She is now an entirely new entity."

"She's not a titan," Levi said, but this time his voice was weak.

"I never said that she was," Petra said. "She is the girl that managed to act like a titan and still have her humanity triumph. Could Pride have done that? No - I don't think so. Pride was the girl that believed she was the best; Y/N is the girl that is now going to prove it."

"What's the point of this conversation?" Levi asked, steeling himself against the tears forming in his eyes.

"You cannot charge headfirst into battle without a single thought to other people or yourself because you believe that you love her. You cannot love her, Levi Ackerman. You do not know her, and that's what scares you so much. Because if you do not know her as you once did, how on earth can you love her?"

"I -" Levi started to say, with no words in mind. He had nothing to say, nothing to argue.

His team continued to ride in silence, and he relaxed slightly, thinking that Petra had relaxed her attack of truth.

He was wrong.

"You can love a memory, Levi. But if you keep trying to force that memory of a girl onto the one that is right here, right now - you're going to lose her forever. You'll suffocate her with the memory of the girl that she once was - you'll kill Y/N, just as she killed Pride. The sooner you realize that, the sooner that you can let her breathe."
Isabel was silent as she rode Strawberry hard into the breaking of the day.

It was scaring Sasha immensely - she'd seen Isabel rave, cry her eyes out, scream. Isabel felt emotions so strongly, so fiercely - but she had never, never seen Isabel just... stop.

Sasha glanced backwards, barely seeing anything in the scarce dawn's light. Their year had spread across miles, riding in the dark, hoping to see something. Jean, Sasha, Mikasa and Isabel were in a team - Isabel leading, with Mikasa taking up the rear.

"She is not alright," Mikasa's cool voice rose against the noise of hooves and the stretch of leather. Sasha started - somehow, she'd ended up at the back alongside the dark-haired girl. Sasha loosed a breath, glad that Jean and Isabel were quite far ahead now, riding in silence. Hell, when Jean was silent, she knew things were bad.

"I don't know what to do," Sasha replied, shaking her head and feeling her brown hair whip around her face. She kept her whip clutched tightly in her hands, needing the feel of the smooth and cruel weapon. "I don't know what to do, or what to say. How can I make her feel better?"

"The only way you'd make her feel better is by lying to her," Mikasa said, slowly. "But I do not think that you're the kind of person to lie to a friend, even if it is to make them feel better."

"Her life these past months has been about Y/N - all of it. She's gotten stronger, meaner, quieter - all so that she'd be strong enough to get that girl back." Mikasa stayed quiet this time. "I think that she got so obsessed with the idea of Y/N that she... She's almost become her. She wanted that girl in her life so much that she's become her, that she's got this voice of Pride in her head."

"I don't think you're wrong," Mikasa said. "We all grieve in our own way - and Isabel's too stubborn to accept a loss."

Despite herself, despite the depression hovering within her mind, Sasha smiled a small smile. "So what? I just let her clam up, let her get rid of Isabel and become Pride? I refuse - I've already lost one friend, I will not stand to lose another."

Mikasa grinned.

"Then you make her find Isabel again. That's what you do."
The City

The fact that the city had risen up, emerging from the horizon in a daunting shadow, almost had you scared. You couldn't explain why you'd come here – here, of all places. This was madness - to go straight into the heart of humans and hide there, becoming nothing short of a memory. But sometimes the best places to hide were in plain view; you supposed that in a grand-scale version of hide and seek, the city was equal to a bed.

You were going to hide underneath it.

You'd heard the whispers of Isabel, Farlan and Levi when they'd thought they were alone in the year that you were human with them - how they met, how they came together in a city that had never seen the sunlight. If there were three people that you knew without a doubt would tear apart the world to look for you, they were them. The others would stop when it became clear that they were dealing with far more trouble than you were worth. When it became clear that the world was better off forgetting your existence entirely.

But Isabel would never stop.

Isabel would never halt in her objective to get you back - and you knew this absolutely because you would have done the exact same thing, had she been you and you her. And even as she tore herself apart to return you to the girl you'd been, she'd never waver in her decision. And then there was the fact that if Isabel searched for you, Farlan would be damned rather than let her go alone. If Farlan were given half a chance, you'd stake quite a large amount of money on the fact that he'd let you rot in the dirt. But for Isabel, the bright girl in both of your lives, he'd search until the ends of the earth for you.

And Levi...

It was hard to think of Levi. What he'd do.

You clenched your fist tighter on the reigns, the metal of your ring biting into your finger. You were banking on the fact that if those three came looking for you, the darkness of the underground city would stomp out the light of their hope. You had to believe that they'd all be too petrified, too fearful of the darkness of the sprawling city beneath their feet to even think about looking down there for you.

Raven swayed in his path as you sharply brought yourself back to your own body. You had no idea what you were going to do with the horse when you reached the city - a horse like this was inconspicuous. The smart people would stare and know that you were wealthy, despite your haggard appearance. The smarter people would look and then think about the amount of money there would surely be in your bag. And the smartest people would already be marking you as a target.

There would be no need for a horse in the Underground City.

But if the wrong people found this horse near the city, they'd know where you were - roughly. It was that thought that had you reigning Raven to a halt, too harshly for the horse's liking. He whinnied in a harsh tone - how a horse managed to sound condescending, you'd never know.

A flicker of a memory rippled to the surface, a boy’s face with an irritating eyebrow raised as he smirked at you –
You choked the memory of Jean quickly, smothering it. Freedom had already made you far too reliant on things of the past; what was wrong with you? Raven slowed to a grateful halt, and you could almost feel his legs shaking. Twisting yourself, you slipped lightly from the saddle and onto the wet grass. Raven was indeed covered in sweat, and now that he'd stopped running, you knew it wasn't long until he caught a chill.

You considered telling yourself that it was just a horse, and that it was a liability in your escape. But the moment anyone used the words “it is just a”, you knew that it was already a lost cause. You led Raven to a nearby stream and sacrificed ten minutes rinsing him down and rubbing him dry with the towel in your bag. After that, you looked at him contentedly cropping the grass and started to walk away, towards the city. Raven snickered behind you, and your heart sank as you heard him run after you. “Stay away. Go home.”

The horse, unsurprisingly, didn't listen.

You missed your horse, but you were fast coming to like Raven. But when he was stubbornly following you to a place where a horse had no business, you had to do something. You whirled and grabbed his reigns, forcing his head down to your eye level. “You listen to me,” you hiss, allowing a titan-like snarl to creep into your voice. “You have to go home. Right now.” With that, you let the horse pull free of your grip and hesitantly trot a few paces away. You drew a silver dagger, allowing the light to glint of its clean blade, and stepped towards the horse menacingly. Raven, thankfully, got the message and started to gallop away, back the way you'd came.

You didn’t bother to watch his figure shrink back – didn’t want to think about what the titans would do if they got their clawed hands on him. Didn't even want to think about what the humans would do if they found him.

Instead of bothering to think much at all, you began to job lightly towards the city, the past forming a shadow in your mind that had suspicious eyes of onyx.

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The walls were just as huge as you remembered.

The last time that you'd been here, at these walls, you'd faced a number of titans and had barely escaped with your life. The huge boulder was now in place because of you and your team. The last time you were here, a few meters away on the opposite side of the wall, Levi had kissed you for the first time.

Your fist had been clenched for a good long while now, allowing the iron ring around your finger to cut into your skin just a bit. You hadn't missed Levi's assessing look as he'd seen it, last night on the rooftop garden. Nor had you missed Isabel's blatant hatred that a simple ring had caused to well up.

It was exactly for those reasons that you kept it on your finger. As a reminder, as an unspoken threat to those you loved to stay away.

You pulled the hood of your cloak over your head, allowing the faded brown material to make your face fall into shadow. Then you started to climb the part of the boulder that was encaised in shadow, praying that the soldiers above wouldn't look down to see a cloaked being scaling their wall. Your fingers easily found holes to latch onto, and your upper body strength was enough so that your feet and legs didn't have to work so hard. They were stiff and cramped from riding too long, anyway.
And then - there. At the top of the boulder, where it met with the wall, there was just a crack that allowed light through. You hadn't realized that it was here before - but when Levi and his team had swooped to save you, they must have come through somewhere. They hadn't possessed enough gas to go over the wall - so you figured that they must have come through it. And here it was - a slight crack, a crevice that was just wide enough to slide your body through.

Keeping a careful eye out for any people and keeping the strain in your arms, you levered yourself through and hurriedly let yourself scamper down the other side of the boulder. Your feet finally touched the dusty road, and you hurriedly stepped your way into a street, no more than a hurried person on the way to her next appointment. Your cloak was a comforting weight around your shoulders, and your bag lightly banged on your hip as you swung down side alleys and small roads to avoid any people that you saw.

You kept close to the slums; where the poorest people slept in the cool arches of abandoned doorways, and water dripped down the broken drainpipes. Your knee-high boots lightly made their weaving way around the city, careful not to step in anything that looked suspiciously like waste and rubbish. One hand, you kept on the handle of your dagger. Hunger and poverty made people desperate - desperate enough to do stupid things. Stupid enough to attack a cloaked figure that had a very full bag of something at her hip.

As if you'd summoned them, two men appeared in the entrance of the alley that you'd been heading for. You didn't let their appearance daunt you, although it sent a wave of dread through your stomach. You kept your steps level, although you allowed them to become louder, fiercer. The sounds of your footsteps echoed through the cobblestones at your feet, and you kept your face down and cloaked in shadow.

You were well aware of the third man behind you, too close and too deliberate to be anyone apart from the shepherd, guiding you towards his partners. From under your hood, you saw the leader of the two men ahead of you grin and lean against the wall, his eyes travelling up and down your body - or what little he could see underneath the cloak. Your clothes were dark and loose, but the way that his eyes hovered over your chest told you that he'd gleaned what gender you were under the clothes.

“Well hello there,” he purred, or close enough to a purr as his low voice could handle. You stopped then, not three meters away from them. “What business could a little thing like you be having in a place like this?”

“Small talk like that is useless,” you said, blunt. Your body stilled of its own accord, without even a thought. “Are you also going to ask me what my sign is?”

The man cocked his head, teeth glinting. “I'll humour you - what's your sign?” Your lips curled, despite yourself. “Don’t look like that; if you want me to try all the lines in the book, baby, we're going to be here a while.”

“Unfortunately, we don't have that kind of time,” the shorter male at his side said. “We can make just enough to see what you've got in that bag, and then we have to hurry on our way...”

The leader shot him a pouting face. “Don't be so rude to the lady,” he abolished. “Surely we can make some time for her...”

Your stomach tightened as you felt the man behind you come closer. When all three men took one more step towards you, you drew a silver dagger and twisted on your ankles, slipping around and under the man behind you so that your dagger ended up along his neck.
The men stopped laughing.

“Don't be so rude to the lady,” you mimicked, kicking the back of the man's knees so that he collapsed to the ground at your feet. “That's better; I like you kneeling.” The man whimpered but made no other movement; if he had nodded, he'd slit his own throat on the blade that you held there. “Did you not hear me?” You simpered, casting a glare at the two men left standing. They couldn't see your face due to the hood, but they caught onto your rage pretty quickly. The leader was the last to kneel - but kneel he did.

“Lower,” you said, tightening the knife and allowing just a line of blood to appear on the man's throat. The leader pressed his forehead to the ground, and you could see his body shaking. “Now, show me where the entrance to the Underground City is.”

"The Underground City?" The leader said, looking up at you. He began to rise up, pointing left with a shaking hand. "It's two streets that way -"

"Shut up," you snarled. "I want you to show me."

The leader stood up and started to meekly walk in the opposite direction to which he’d pointed. You released your deadly hold on the man at your feet, allowing him to fall to the ground in thanks. You stepped neatly away from him and towards the leader, flicking a speck of dirt that was on your gloves away.

The leader led you away from his cronies through a matrix of alleys and streets. You linked arms with him, looking to the rest of the world like two youngsters on an early walk. They wouldn't look closer, not to see the flash of a silver dagger that you kept positioned between his ribs. "Are you from the Underground?" You asked, keeping your eyes ahead.

The leader barked a laugh, which he quicklyquietened. "Are you kidding me? I'm just a humble thief! The things that are down there - they're monsters. The people will sooner stab you in the back than look at you." You felt his wary gaze as he again looked you over. "You'll get on well with them, I think."

You flashed him a winning smile from underneath your hood. "I have a feeling that you are right."

He turned down yet another alley, and you saw the tunnel that lead down to shadowy depths. You grinned at the distant sounds of machinery, of screams and yells. Letting your arm slip free from the man at your side, you began the descent without so much of a goodbye.

"Ma'am?" An official said, and you turned towards him. He saw nothing of your face - that was covered in shadow - but somehow, it was enough to let you slip between his fingers. He wasn't worried about people going below, anyway. They were only worried about people coming back up.

And so as the man cast you a mocking farewell, waving and then tucking his hands into his pockets. You grinned and continued walking, waiting just a couple of seconds until -

"STOP THAT GIRL!"

You smirked but didn't stop. You lightly took out the wallet that you'd swiped from his pockets and weighed it in your hands, the coins inside rattling to greet their new owner. The yells of the man faded into the background, as you'd predicted that they would. The man was more scared of the Underground than he had been about the loss of his money. With men like him, you supposed that perhaps that was meant to mean something.

But with a disaster with a heartbeat like you, it meant nothing. You took each step lightly, allowing
the impenetrable dark to swallow you, embrace you.

The descent below was indeed easy; when it was merely walking down hundreds of stairs, it was a wonder that anyone believed the descent was anything beyond merely annoying.

But the Underground City was amazing.

Even as you'd lost count of your steps leading down the twisted, steadily worsening staircase, you found yourself marvelling at the depth. These people - children, men and women, elderly - had most likely never even seen sunlight, or had lived down here long enough to forget it. It was a good thing, you supposed, that you didn't mind the darkness.

But that thought was discarded as soon as you stepped through the gate at the long-awaited end of the stairs.

The Underground was not dark.

Lights, in fact, were everywhere; they had been scattered throughout the entire structure like dead leaves in the autumn breeze. Once your eyes had adjusted, you began to see that all of the buildings - the ones bordering the edges of the simply gigantic cavern - were all carved from the rock that made up the ceiling, the floor. The Underground city had been hollowed out with one purpose in mind - to become a city for the poor, for the dirty criminals. The sun had forgotten these people; that made it easy for the officials above land to forget about their existence, too.

You took all of one step into the streets, almost in awe of the life down here. Children were screaming in the streets; granted, from the dirtiness of their faces and their clothes, it was not likely to be the good kind of screaming - but there were children. There were people down here, alive. It was amazing.

You almost grinned, had you not caught the hungry stares of the people around you. You felt them - those searching, probing eyes. They travelled to your bag at your hip, which was leather and fine enough to entice them further, to look at the hood that covered your head and to the sly winks of the silver daggers that you casually allowed to be peeked at. Keeping your head down, you started to walk.

Even the children turned their half-feral eyes on you. Those eyes were not belonging to those who had been well-fed all of their lives. One of them took half a step towards you, as if they were considering to either beg or steal, but you made a show of turning your face towards him. Under the hood, you made sure that your eyes caught the gleam of light and winked at him.

The boy blushed and promptly fled the scene, melting into the shadows of the alleys that he undoubtedly knew very well. These children are smart, you mused. To know where to run, whom to steal from and whom not to. You cast your eyes around, noting whose eyes had followed you and whose were pointedly looking in the other direction, and followed the boy.

Your boots made little sound on the rock street, but it wouldn't have mattered even if they had - the clattering, noisy sounds of everyday life drowned out most noise. But your silent footsteps sent a message to those who knew how to translate it. People on innocent business didn't bother masking their footfalls; people on murderous business tried and often failed.

But the dangerous ones were the ones whose footsteps were silent everywhere that they went, no matter what shoes or ground they were walking on.

Your cloak parted and let the few people frequenting the edges of the alley glimpse your clothes -
black as night, and fine as any rich person. Fine enough to draw their eyes for a moment too long, before their ears picked up the lack of sound you were making. The ones that stayed staring at you, you dismissed. The few who knew to look away after a second, you marked. You looked into their faces and attacked them with your eyes, noting down details, appearances.

And then there was one who didn't look at all, although you knew she knew of your presence.

A small child, normally, wouldn't be of cause for concern. But a girl, haggard and dirty, not even bothering to turn around? No. Children were curious by nature - they would have looked, even for a second. For a glimpse of the deathly, cloaked person who had just arrived with good clothes and deathly silent footfalls.

And yet this child, barely thirteen, did not look.

You went right up to her and leaned against the wall where she was, ignoring the pointed glances and the increased murmuring of the people around you. The girl stiffened slightly, almost unnoticeable - it was only because you were close enough to see the strain of her neck as she told herself again and again not to look. "Hello, little bird." You breathed, leaning back - ever the picture of a relaxed, naive visitor. A person who knew the Underground would know that this was a stupid move. A stupid move from an ignorant, easily stolen from person.

"I am not a bird," she replied, with equal quiet. Her hair had once been brown, you supposed, as you let yourself admire the now dirty black. The child had pulled it into a braid, sloppily, uncaring and purely for the purpose of getting out of her face. "I am a snake."

"Hello, little snake." You amended, and the child stiffened more at the tone of your voice. Playful, cutting. With a hint of knowing. "I'm looking for the leader of the children around here."

The girl didn't look convinced. She flicked her head, finally looking at you. You shifted your cloak, shielding the girl from view from those people behind you. If they saw her, they'd begin to wonder why you had stopped to talk to her. And you hardly wanted the thoughts of these people on anything but you.

"What do you want?" The girl said bluntly.

"You want to hear the list?" You said, and allowed your hood to slip a little further back from your head. Her eyes devoured everything that they could see - the H/C hair that was greasy and pulled back/ the hijab that had dampened due to sweat, the face that was also flecked with grime. The girl shook her head, her eyes unforgiving in their assessment.

"I want to hear what is first on your list." She frowned at you. "Then, once we have addressed the first, we can deal with the rest."

"My first house - to secure lodging."

"For who."

There was no question in the little girl's voice - she managed to command the answer, rather than ask for them. You had to stop yourself from grinning too widely at the joy this little human had managed to stir within you. "For all of the beggared children of these streets."

The girl blinked.

Once. Twice.
"I'll take you to the leader."

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"What's your name, little snake?" You asked, allowing the girl to take your hand and lead you through the streets. You could feel her hand quivering in your hold, and there was a spring in her step that you highly doubted had been there before.

"We don't have names," the girl replied, tugging you down a side alley. There were so many hiding holes down here, you noted, not pretending to do anything but mark exactly where you were. You knew that you were delving not into the center of the city, as you'd expected, but rather the outskirts of the entire establishment. "We have positions and quotas to fill, though. If we want food or spoils."

"I see," you said, pretending as though your vision was not descending into a red, simmering film. "Where do you sleep?"

"Anywhere that we can."

There it was again - we. These children were not alone in their suffering; they had each other and rotas and positions. These children were adults in starving, little bodies. Whilst you could understand why any parent would abandon a child in these conditions, you couldn't stop the rage at the injustice as it simmered in your blood. Better a child that you don't know die on the streets than a child of your own starving in front of your eyes. That was the kind of thinking that the parents in this city had adopted.

You knew this. And now you were going to use it to your advantage.

"Here. It's here."

The girl let her hand slip from yours as she left you in the alleyway. As you looked to the side, following her with your eyes, she wiped a small smile from her face as she immediately folded herself into her body, making herself smaller and easy to miss. Impossible to notice, unless one had seen her from the beginning. Suddenly, with that revelation, you realized that you were not alone in the alley. There were children at the sides, some slumbering, right at the very edges where building met path. Due to the shadows and the dirt of their clothes, as well as the quietness of their breaths, you'd assumed that they were nothing but rags dumped at the side.

Some watched you with eyes that were dull - but not due to sadness or stupidity. They were dull because the children had trained themselves to be so. Eyes that sparked and glowed with intelligence were sure to get them marked, to get them seen. And when their power revolved around being invisible, eyes that were bright were not needed.

The children who watched looked faintly shocked at being seen and scurried to look away. You dared to take another step, into the courtyard. It was darker here than it had been at the entrance to the Underground; whether for convenience of the shadows or because the officials hadn't wanted to waste light on a dark place, you did not know.

The courtyard was a bit livelier than the alley.

Children were sprawling in the dirt, to the watchful eyes of those smaller or weaker. You noted both boys and girls, of people about your age and lower. Way lower - some children cradled small bundles, whether their siblings or other orphans, you didn't want to find out. The courtyard was big - big enough to have at least one hundred children sprawling comfortably in the space. You did not
know whose houses surrounded the courtyard, but as you seethed with quiet fury, you resolved to find out.

"How did you find us?"

A boy stepped out from the shadows at the edges of the courtyard, and the effect was instantaneous. Any child who had not already noticed you did so, and silence swept throughout everyone. Even the babies quieted their starving cries; from infancy, trained to fall silent at the drop of a coin. You pulled your focus towards the boy that stepped forward; he was clothed well, compared to those around him. Not that he looked mean; he had a brutal scar down the left of his face, disappearing briefly behind a tacky eye patch that covered whatever had been left of his eye. From the width of the scar, you guessed that not much had remained.

But regardless, it showed that he had undoubtedly fought for the clothes that were on his back.

"Are you the leader here?" You asked, the quiet midnight of your voice reaching every corner of the space. You waited until he nodded, once. You then let your hood fall back to show all of your face, to show your grin of wildfire. "Good."

"How did you find us?"

You didn't miss a few children slowly reaching for their crude weapons - clubs, sticks with nails in the end, wire that had been barbed. "I followed the sounds."

"What sounds?" The boy snapped, his eyes flashing furiously. Proud - he was proud, you realized. He was proud of the group of children that he led and refused to believe that they made any sound at all. It was a mark of what a little distance could do that you didn't flinch from that fact.

"I followed the lack of them," you winked, smiling roguishly. The smile alone won a few children, you saw, amusement quickly flaring in a few of their smiles before they smothered that joy. "Now, I have a list of things I need to do during my stay here." The boy blinked; he'd forgotten the ways of passivity, the ways of talking and bargaining. "The first is to get housing for all beggared children in the Underground."

A ripple of shock tore a way through the silence of the Underground, and a few children either gasped or giggled at your proclamation. "Us?" The boy said.

"You," you agreed. "Now. Firstly - who owns these surrounding houses?"

There was indeed only one house that surrounded the entire courtyard - two stories high, very long. More than enough room to start work. There were multiple doors leading into it - and yet you saw no children inside, looking from the windows.

The boy swallowed. "They don't come here. They live above ground."

"Then why don't we move in?" You said it easily, nonchalantly. But despite the easiness with which you proposed it, you did not miss the sudden fear within the boy's eyes.

"Soldiers visit often. They tolerate us in the courtyard, as long as we don't draw attention to the house. But last time we went in... They came and killed those who went in. My sister -"

The boy didn't finish his sentence. You smiled at him, genuinely. "Then wait here for me, and don't draw attention to the house. I'll be back for you all."

With that, you shot all of the awed children a fierce wink and grin, turned on your heel and swept...
back down the alley, drawing your hood back up. You made it down the alley and turned left, into a street that was mostly empty. If you didn't know where the alley was, you never would. It sank into an alcove, and none would give it a second look.

You made it all of two steps before you knew you were being followed.

"Are you really going to get us a house?"

You smiled at the girl, jogging alongside you in order to keep up. "Yes, little snake. Would you help me?"

"I'll help you," the girl said, her eyes sad, dark moons in her sunken face. "But I don't exactly know how."

"It should be easy," you smiled. "Show me the way to the furthest patrol of soldiers. Preferably as far away from your little base as possible."

The girl considered her orders carefully, her feet already knowing where she wanted to go. Together, you drifted down streets and alleys with enough ease that you almost sniggered at the lack of challenge. But the soldiers would be harder to beat and impress than the children - the soldiers had been dealing in criminal affairs their entire posting here. There was no doubt that you'd have to use more than a grin and wink to win them over.

"They come down here every hour - they should arrive in the next three minutes." The girl looked at you for her new orders, and you raised an eyebrow in a silent command. Your little snake disappeared into the shadows, although you had no doubt that she'd merely hidden herself, eager to watch what you would do.

You didn't have to wait long, leaning carelessly against the side of the alley. Their clattering footsteps alerted you to their coming presence, along with their dark but formal uniforms that had grown to be dusty in the underground. You turned your head, allowing the soldiers to see the thin-lipped smile you were giving them.

"State your business," one of the soldiers said, her voice lovely and bored.

"I want to own a house," you said, finally leaning off the wall and stepping lightly closer. "A very specific house, actually."

"Then run your hide to the Housing Office. We don't deal with mundane affairs."

You flashed a crooked grin at the leading soldier, enjoying the sight of her mouth tightening in displeasure. "But what if the house is already owned? What do I do then?"

The soldiers behind the leader began sniggering in derisiveness. "Then you search for a different house," she bluntly said, as if you were as stupid as you were currently pretending to be. Their laughter told you enough - they were no longer worried about how close you had come to their little squad.

"That will not do for my purposes, I'm afraid," you said, coming to a stop, a mere meter away from the leader. "Who, exactly, is Lovof?"

The name worked wonders. The soldiers were too well-trained to gasp or glance at each other, but you saw their immediate unease in the way that their feet shifted and eyes widened, as though they were only just becoming aware of how close you were. It was the name that had been on the plaque beside the door to the house you wished to own; you'd guessed that the huge house, tucked
away in the smallest part of the city, belonged to someone infamous. To someone who the soldiers knew to stay away from.

Someone who had the soldiers tucked so securely under their thumb that the soldiers would go so far as to kill a child for wandering into their property.

"Who are you?" The woman asked, her face remaining still and focused.

"Someone who wants to own a house," you smiled charmingly. "Someone who wants Lovof's house."

"You're mad," one of the soldiers behind the leader breathed, before being elbowed sharply by those next to him. The woman glared behind her, effectively shutting all the murmurs down, before turning and looking at you with a stare that would have put Mikasa to shame.

"Nicholas Lovof is absent from the underground due to his imprisonment," she told you, watching as you tucked the information away. "He has connections with people, however, that are still very strong. You do not want to push this."

"I assure you that I do," you said, looking up at her through your lashes. "So where should I go?"

"You are coming with us," the soldier garbled, signifying to those behind her to grab you. You allowed them to grip your forearms and hustle you into a steady step beside them. You flashed a smile behind you, hoping that your snake would see and know everything was alright. You skipped along the patrol of soldiers readily, easily irking them. "Can you not," one of them hissed at you. You stuck your tongue out at them in response and began lifting off from the floor entirely, allowing the soldiers to take the full brunt of your weight. They grumbled in response, among other things.

Soon, a prison came into view. You cackled at the sight of it - surely, in the slums where criminals lived and breathed, a prison was unnecessary? But here one was, looming into sight. Your eyes must have showed your distaste, because one of the soldiers holding your arms huffed a laugh and dragged you on. "You're throwing me into jail?"

"You are suspected of crimes against Nicholas Lovof," the lead soldier snapped, barely throwing you a glance. "Do you deny planning to rob him of his house?"

"One can't help but plan for many situations," you shrugged, which was a feat in itself as your arms were currently turning numb due to the vice-like grip the soldiers had on you.

You all marched through the front doors, and the jailer looked hurriedly up from his desk and gestured wildly down the corridor. Two soldiers escorted you into a dark cell, the iron bars screaming on their way to meet. You turned lightly on your heel and smiled charmingly at the male soldiers, both of whom - much to your delight - blushed and hurried away after locking you in - after taking the bag at your hip.

"Can't believe that you're smiling," a man grumbled from the opposite cell - the only other inhabitant. You dropped your smile and came close to the bars, peering in to where he was crumpled into a sad heap in the corner. "If I had any money, I'd take a bet as to how long you'd manage to keep your sunny outlook."

"What are you in for?" You asked.

"I'm a cleaner, but because I had access to everywhere in the house... I took a little more than I was being paid, shall we say."
"My house is going to be in need of a cleaner," you mused, toeing the ground. "Want a job?"

The man's eyes darted to you. "I just told you that I'm a thief."

"You're a bad thief," you corrected haughtily. "A good thief wouldn't have been caught, and I'm hardly scared of a bad thief. So I hope that you are better as a cleaner than you are at stealing."

The man said nothing - he merely gave you a patronizing look. How he managed it in his position, crumpled and with long, greasy hair... You were almost impressed. You shrugged anyway, turning back to your cell door. Fishing two slender pieces of metal from the lining of your cloak, you crouched by the lock for roughly ten seconds before the metal clicked open. What came next was harder - and longer. You'd heard how the metal had shrieked as it closed - there was no way you'd like to open it with the same sound effects.

Slowly - painfully slowly - the door had opened just enough for you to squeeze through the slender gap without opening it any more. You cast a glance towards the cleaner, who had been watching you with an open mouth for the past few minutes. You sketched an elaborate bow and crept away, your footfalls silent on the stone floor.

If Nicholas had been arrested and taken above ground, then there was one place to start to look through his belongings. The officials wouldn't have kept his possessions in Lovof's house – too risky, with all of the children there. They would have kept it close, the belongings and paperwork of an important man like Lovof.

And where better to keep information than the one place where no one in the underground wanted to go?

You crept under the jailer's desk with feline ease, hearing the old man's snores and knowing that you could probably waltz around and he wouldn't wake. But creeping around made you more at ease. You swiped your bag back from where it had been thrown into a tray under the desk.

It took you an hour of searching through the prison and its cells to find the sealed off room at the end of a corridor. You hadn't needed to reach for your lockpicks - the keys that you'd swiped from the jailer would be enough. The room itself was unimpressive - without windows, it was incredibly dark as well. But the shelves and cabinets that bordered the entire room was what intrigued you enough to look longer.

Lovof was a careful man.

Clearly, he hadn't intended anyone to make it this far simply into a criminal's affairs.

For every single box was neatly stacked and labelled with both his name and titles: Deals and Ideas were the biggest two boxes, situated at the bottom. Then came the things named Taxes, but in two parts - Legal and Private.

And then there was house affairs.

You smiled as you reached for the box.

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The children looked up at you as you stalked your way back through their alley. Some of them gawked - you had no doubt that by now, your little snake had told all of them the story of you being carted to jail. You didn't fault her for it, for not keeping quiet; after all, she had no real reason to trust you.
But the house key in your hand was likely to change that, you supposed.

The man at your back held his greasy, dirty head high - displaying guts that you weren't even sure he had possessed. Once you'd gotten the key and had stolen the documents, planning to do some mild editing of the information on it, you hadn't the heart to just leave him rotting in the cell.

You'd had enough of jails and cells anyway.

You both cleared the alley and stepped into the courtyard. The children didn't fall silent, as they had done before - no, their muttering raised into shouting as you walked confidently through their ranks towards the house at their back and deftly reached for the handle.

Using a key instead of a lockpick was easier, you noted with no small amount of ire. The door swung open, the dark emptiness of the room being revealed to all those children, desperate and packed into the courtyard. You turned with the key held aloft - mostly for effect, you weren't going to lie, angling the iron key just right so that what little light there was, it reflected and made it shine. "This house belongs to me now," you said, knowing that your voice would carry. "It is mine, and I offer it to you all. All I ask is that you give me and your housekeeper an afternoon to clean it and make sure that it is suitable. Gather all the little birds still on the street and tell them - a house big enough for a small army is waiting to welcome you all. Be back at nightfall," you finished, grinning widely. You and the man stepped into the house and you quickly shut the door behind you; the whoops and laughing you heard from the courtyard was immense.

It made you feel better.

"Right," you said, arching an eyebrow at the empty house. You stalked to a counter along the side of the long entrance hall, sliding a gloved finger across the top and grimacing at the dust. "You said you were a good cleaner."

The man coughed and began gaping at the simply massive house. "You have got to be kidding me."

"You have until nightfall," you shrugged, unable to hide your tiger's grin. "I'll go around and take inventory of rooms - I have a feeling we'll be needing a lot of them. We have no need for rooms such as parlours; we'll convert them into whatever space we need."

You turned, only to find that the man was gone. Knowing that he was somewhere nearby, you yelled into the empty, dusty space. "What's your name?"

"Olyver!" Came the very distant reply.

You smiled as you heard the distinct sounds of a bucket being dropped and someone falling over it. "Indeed."

***

The house was spectacular.

It only had two floors, plus a cellar, but the pure span of the building was such that the number of floors didn't matter - it was immense.

But even so, the pure number of children that were piling inside, it soon felt very, very full. There weren't nearly as many beds as you needed, but since the second floor was purely made up of bedrooms, the floors were carpeted and better than the cobblestone outside. You and Olyver sat outside, on one of the benches under the terrace of the house. The man had somehow also found
the time to clean himself up - to reveal tawny hair that reminded you of Farlan, and brown eyes that sparkled every now and again.

The courtyard was completely cleared. You could hear the distant sound of children laughing inside, yelps and then more laughter as suddenly, children were getting their own rooms. Of course, there were five children per room - but since the rooms were spacious and more luxurious than you'd expected, you didn't feel too guilty about making them share. After all, these children had grown up together. Sharing a room was better than fighting for a single space in a courtyard.

"You said you'd get us a house," a voice came from Olyver's left, making him jump to attention.

"Yes, little snake," you smiled. The girl bit her lip.

"Won't the soldiers come?"

"No. It's all officially in paper. The soldiers can't touch me or you."

"You said that this was your first goal. What's your next one?"

"I want to furnish and start getting food into this house. That's my next goal."

The girl shivered excitedly, before disappearing into the house. You smiled at Olyver's dramatic scene of calming his racing heart. "You knew exactly how to get a house. I have no doubt that you know exactly how to get a source of income and food."

You cast a sidelong glance at the boy. He was young - older than you, but still young. "I may have an idea."

"You're doing this in steps," Olyver said. "This is all ordered steps, to end up with a massive goal that would be otherwise non-existent. So tell me, ma'am - what's the final step?"

You bit your lip. "I’m not entirely sure yet. I’ve only gotten this far because I had the time to plan out what I would do if I were ever free. But there is a distant goal, one that I’m not sure about yet."

“What is it?"

“My eventual goal? To be crowned Queen."

Olyver had enough sense to not snort. "To be Queen of what?"

"Queen of Everything."

You could do it, if you wanted. You had no doubt that you could manage it, favour by favour and task by task. You were already in the correct position for becoming Queen of the titans – and in the process of getting the human crown. But now you had to decide if you wanted it.

Truly wanted the chains of a crown.

“And what's your goal for tomorrow?"

You almost laughed at Olyver's unending knack of surprising you with his thought process. "My goal for tomorrow is to go and do a little bit of shopping. That's all."

"I may be a bad thief and a slightly better cleaner," Olyver said, watching as you stood up and dusted yourself off, "but when a girl like you says 'that's all', all those with sense get themselves ready for war."
“Yes,” you replied, your mind distantly focusing on someone else, a boy who was probably more than a few hundred miles away. “That's a good idea.”
“Sasha, we've lost sight of our leader.”

Sasha sighed and grimaced at Connie's ire-filled tone. He stuck out his tongue, before switching his attention to his side, where Jean was atop his horse. "We were meant to go straight back to school after searching through the wooded areas," she said, although they were useless words - everyone knew them to be true anyway. "Why, exactly, are we here?"

"You know why," Marco said, rolling his eyes for what seemed like the fourteenth time in five minutes. "Isabel wouldn't go back to school after she'd searched the woods, so she thought it would be a great idea to continue searching."

"Which is why we're now in the city," Jean dramatically concluded, much to Marco's chagrin. "We couldn't very well let her go alone." The city was busy at the noon hour, and Sasha knew that they were attracting a lot of attention - their uniforms weren't exactly inconspicuous, and they all had horses and weapons. The plan had been simple - breaking every rule within their school, but still simple. To get into the city, to have a look and search for the girl, and then to ride home with or without her. But-

"We've still lost sight of Isabel, idiot," Ymir stated, and Jean glared at everyone. Sasha slumped in the wooden bench that she hardly found comfortable after the week of riding that it had taken their group to get here from the north territory. "She's going to run herself into the ground, no matter what we say."

Sasha looked at her run down, exhausted crew. They were sprawled outside on the market shops in the city - Jean still astride his mare, saying that “if I get off, I don't think I'll manage to get back on” and the rest of them sitting in the narrow strips of shade that the overhanging terrace provided. Connie and Marco were sitting with their backs against the bench, and Ymir and Christa were on the left side of the bench. Mikasa and Armin were standing a little ways off, looking at the streets with interest. They'd grown up near here, Sasha realized. She'd grown up near here. Somehow, she'd come a long way from the girl she'd been two or three years ago.

Eren and Isabel were nowhere to be seen, but Sasha couldn't find it within herself to particularly care. They were undoubtedly together, and that was good enough for her. They knew where the rest of them were - and they'd come back when they were good and ready. Or as ready as they could be.

“Tch. What the rutting hell are you brats doing here?”

Sasha lazily opened her eyes to see the angered male on top of Skira. Skira looked positively furious - furious at the fact that she'd been forced into a saddle, and furious at her rider. Connie choked on his sentence to Jean, who merely drew himself up and looked coolly at Levi Ackerman, leading his team of third years through the streets of the city.

"You aren't meant to be here," Petra said from behind Levi, looking at all of them with interest. Sasha bit down on her lip at the sight of her - although she'd long ago vowed never to hold grudges, which she thought as too much effort anyway, she couldn't find the heart to just forget what the amber-haired girl had done to her and Connie, a year ago. Forgive, certainly. Petra had even been the one to offer Sasha a cloak. But forget? Never.

"Neither are you," a voice answered coolly, on the other side of the street. Isabel drew back her...
hood and nudged Strawberry forward, Eren and his horse at her side. Mikasa breathed a sigh of relief, which Sasha ignored. "Third years were meant to go into titan's territory, which is east. You're a long way from any titans, Aniki."

"Second years were meant to go north," Eld answered, smiling. He and Gunther nodded at Levi before turning their horses down a street to the left, clearly looking for the same thing that Sasha and her team were.

"The north didn't have her," Isabel shrugged, before climbing awkwardly down from her horse. Despite her constant swaggering, the constant strain had taken its toll on her stamina. Jean quickly slid from his own horse to grab her elbow, which she gratefully swayed towards. A year ago, Sasha knew that Isabel would sooner have punched Jean than accept physical help. From the way that Levi's eyes widened in concern at the red-haired girl's stiffness, she knew that he saw it too.

"The east wouldn't have had her either," Levi replied, watching as Isabel's legs slowly came to support her again. Jean looked morosely at his horse before sighing and collapsing next to Marco in a relieved huff, Marco eyeing him warily before closing his eyes against the sun again.

Levi watched them all with barely alert eyes, although Sasha didn’t doubt that he was shrewdly concentrating on all that needed his attention. As she scanned him, Sasha caught sight of a leather band around his wrist - the same as all of them had. But she couldn't see a bangle - what had Y/N chosen for him, the man that she undoubtedly loved? Sasha cursed inwardly and corrected herself - the man that she had loved.

Isabel took light and short steps towards the raven-haired male, and Sasha steeled herself as she got up from the bench. Her very bones protested at the movement, but she gritted her teeth as she pulled her exhausted body into action. "So what are we going to do here?" Isabel looked faintly shocked to hear Sasha's strained voice. Sasha knew that she was meant to be upbeat, that she was meant to be an unending source of energy. But they were well past being what they were meant to.

"I think that there's something that you two know," Jean said, slowly heaving his own body to its feet to stand just behind Isabel with his arm outstretched - just in case she needed it. Sasha watched him scan both Levi and Isabel’s faces and darken as he found the answer that he was searching for. "I think there's something that only you two know, something that would lead you both here."

Sasha saw the truth in the immediate straightening of both Isabel and Levi's postures. She glanced behind her, seeing Connie's confirming nod from where he was still on the floor. “Something that you didn’t tell us before making us follow you,” she followed Jean’s speech, keeping her voice deliberately low.

Dangerous. Sasha Braus had always been a dangerous girl – but given a week of mere trust in another girl who had taken advantage of that, and she was practically seething.

Isabel’s eyes took in the sudden and wrathful energy that Sasha suddenly took in her stride, and widened.

Connie stepped in between them, throwing a warning arm around Sasha’s shoulders and lightly punching Isabel on hers. “Well, unless all of you want to stay the night in the street, I suggest that we find somewhere to stay. Or we act on whatever mad plan you had. Your choice.”

Isabel opened her mouth to defend herself, but Eren stepped in. “You know that we don't have any money. And I hardly think that any of your parents will want to see us, let alone house us for a few nights. We're the murdering children, after all.”
“Aniki has a house,” Isabel said, quietly. Sasha looked at her, not quite believing her ears. The rest of the people started talking to each other about a potential inn or something, Mikasa and Armin even drifting closer to offer what little knowledge they could. Sasha stepped closer to Isabel.

Isabel's eyes were wide with something akin to terror, and Sasha darted a glance to Levi - only to find that his eyes were on the ground, as though he could see very, very far down. "It's impossible," he breathed, and Sasha knew that she should have stopped listening. This was not a conversation for anyone except the two in front of her. But Sasha knew that information was sometimes the single weapon that would make a difference on a battlefield. She wasn't going to stop listening - she didn't think she could even if she tried. "We can't go down there again."

"We have nowhere else to go," Isabel said. "Look at us - we're exhausted, the school's probably expelled us all for deserting them, and we're desperate. We're stronger than we were, surely we can manage..."

"I can't go back," Levi said, with his eyes as empty as puddles - black puddles. "We struggled for so long to get out of that city, Isabel - do you not remember?"

"Of course I remember," Isabel hissed. "It was the darkest time of my life. But we're different - we're assassins, for heaven's sake! If we can't get out peacefully, then we fight our way out. Between humanity's strongest soldier, Mikasa, and me, we'd get through. This crew," she gestured to the people behind her, who had all quietened their dispute, sensing that something was happening, "is not weak. This crew has martial arts masters, people fluent in poisons and bows and swords. We can make it."

Levi stopped, looking back to where Petra waited patiently. Sasha could see the calculations that he was running through, adding his team to theirs. "Did... Did you ever tell Y/N about the underground?" Sasha swallowed. She'd guessed enough about their conversation, but the mere mention of the Underground city sent shivers down her spine. It was a place for criminals to run free, where poverty reigned. To know that Isabel came from there... Such a fiery girl, stuck in a place without sun.

"She knew a little about it," Isabel slowly said. "She saw a few of my pictures from that time and asked about them."

"Did she know that we'd never go back there? Not for anything?"

Isabel stopped moving, and Sasha's spine tingled at the moment it took for Isabel to understand. "You think that she's there?"

"She doesn't want to be found. She's ran from us - she wants to be somewhere where she can't hurt us, where we couldn't find her. Wouldn't the perfect place for her to go be the place that even we wouldn't dare to tread?" Levi's voice was rising, with fear and excitement and awe.

Isabel span around, facing Sasha with excitement fizzing in her eyes. "Aniki's got a house for us to go to. It's in the Underground City - if any of you don't want to come, I understand. We might not be able to get back out without a fight."

Sasha didn't have to look behind at her team to know that all of them rolled their eyes, following Marco's most recent trend. "As long as there's a bed, I couldn't care if it was in the titan's territory," Jean muttered. "Let's go."

Levi nodded at Petra, who smiled prettily and took the reigns of Skira, who looked all too willing to leave Levi behind. Sasha cast a glance behind her to where the rest of their team were cooing at
their horses before handing the reigns to Christa and Ymir. Isabel went quickly to murmur directions to the entrance of the Underground, and Sasha crossed the road to send what little money they had with Jean and Marco, ordering them to get as many supplies as they could for as little as possible.

"You really think she's there?" Sasha said to Levi, clear and loud.

"I may not know the girl," Levi replied, his eyes flashing. "But I do know that if she's as smart as Y/N once was, she'd have gone there."

"It's been two weeks since she first left," Sasha reminded him. "Do you not worry what the Underground would have done to her in that time?"

Levi laughed then - a laugh that both scared and excited those who heard it. "Hell, no. I worry what she's done to the Underground in that time. That place won't even know who hit it."

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The descent, in theory, was easy.

Isabel knew that all she had to do was walk down some stairs. Walking - as simple and easy and effortless as breathing. Some stairs? That was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

But the gaping darkness that beckoned at the bottom of the stairs told a different story.

She couldn't help reaching for somebody's hand as their troop marched down those stairs like it was nobody's business. Jean hummed as she gripped his hand with enough force to make it very sore, but he didn't pull away or complain. She wondered if he could feel the terror waiting at the bottom of the stairs as she could.

She followed Levi down the first few steps.

Levi didn't start to panic as she did - she didn't hear any pants or gasps of suppressed fear that came bubbling to the surface. What kind of person was he? To not react to the dark space where they had both grown up was alien. Farlan, if he were here, would be like her. He would have probably grabbed her hand as she had Jean's, and they would have panicked together.

But Farlan wasn't here. He was probably back at school, wondering why they were all nowhere to be seen. She wondered idly if she'd ever see him again.

Levi's team were bringing up the rear, having left their own horses with Christa and Ymir – who would join them later after finding stable spaces. Who would have to make this descent by themselves, all alone in the quivering dark.

Isabel would have rather died.

"Well isn't this just charming."

Isabel hadn't expected Eren's voice to be as loud as it was - she nearly jumped out of her skin at its suddenness. Jean, however, snorted.

"After a few weeks in a titan dungeon, I suppose you'd find this rather lovely."

"Shut up, horseface."

"Shut up, titan-boy."
"You're both unbelievable," Marco muttered, and Isabel felt inclined to agree. "This place could use some carpet. Maybe some panelled walls, just add some homely decorations, don't you think?"

"If you think homely warrants some interesting walls, I think you'd have loved our school’s dungeon – I hear they were lovingly decorated with blood and moss," Connie chipped in, and Sasha snorted from somewhere to Isabel's left.

"There's only vertical decorations involved there, actually - very modern art, I think."

"This is why you're not an artist, Sasha." Armin said.

"You can hardly talk," Eren chimed back in. "I've seen your diagrams of battle plans. You draw stick people and manage to get them massively wrong."

Isabel almost smiled at Armin's rising irritation. "Just because their heads weren't in the right place - I was doing abstract art!"

Mikasa even joined in. "Is that what your mother called it?"

"Mikasa!"

Somehow, Isabel had allowed herself to be caught into the chatter of her friends. Because all too soon, Levi's back stiffened at the sight of the double doors that would lead to the Underground. Levi didn't look at her as he reached a slightly shaking hand to the handle and pushed.

"You're not going to like it here," reported Marco, shaking his head at Eren. "There's no carpet."

"Well, this is where I turn around," Eren sighed, dramatically pausing. Connie groaned and shoved him forwards again. "I can't handle this. Titans for a few months? Piece of cake. Underground city with no carpet? No way in hell."

"The children are looking at us like targets," Mikasa said softly. Isabel's eyes widened, glancing into the alleys that bordered the main roads. She hadn't even seen children - how had Mikasa spotted those shadows? Mikasa turned without preamble to Levi, slyly arranging her body so that it was upright, brimming with power. "Where is this house of yours?"

Levi gave her a patronizing look that would have made Y/N proud. "It's the palace on top of that hill."

"Oh?" Sasha said, making a point of looking far into the distance. "Address?"

"Nunya."

"Is that the street name?" Armin asked.

"Yes. It's Nunya Business."

Isabel tripped and could have sworn that Mikasa stumbled in her graceful path as well. Levi walked on, oblivious to the open-mouthed gape that was being worn on every single member of their team. Petra's eyes widened as she, Eld and Gunther all continued to follow their leader down a street that Isabel was sure she could remember, if she was willing.

She wasn't willing.

"Was that-"
"I think it was -"

"No. Not possible."

"Is the end of the world scheduled for today?"

"Did Levi Ackerman just make a joke?" Mikasa asked, her voice strangled in its disbelief. Eren and Jean stopped their quiet, stunned exchange and looked at the back of the male, walking swiftly away. Sasha stepped in to help Isabel to her feet and they followed the man, their eyes dodging back and forth down alleys and houses.

"This place is not going to be good for any of us," Isabel murmured, and Sasha swallowed a laugh.

"I think you may be right."

***

"There’s bad news - there's scum in my house."

"Right." Isabel stood, dumbfounded, outside what had once been Levi's house. "What's the good news?"

Levi gave her a glare that had her ducking her shoulders and crouching into Mikasa's protective radius. "There is no good news - there is scum inside my house!"

"Get them out of it then!" Connie suggested, while Marco rolled his eyes - again - in the background. They were attracting a lot of attention in the middle of the street; between their uniforms and the sheer number of them, all eyes were on them.

"I can't," Levi spat. "Apparently it's not my house anymore. They said that I technically gave up residency here to become a citizen of the upper world, but I didn’t think that it meant my house was the forfeit. And scum have taken my house."

Isabel shrugged, even as her plan crumbled around her. "As you say, it's not your house anymore. Scum are welcome to it."

"Excuse me?"

Connie yelped as a girl spoke from beside him. Even Mikasa looked faintly stunned - she hadn't seen the girl approach. And if Mikasa Ackerman couldn't, Isabel knew that there was no hope for the rest of them. Jean and Marco glanced at each other before crouching before the girl, the latter smiling kindly. Isabel hadn't bothered to tell him about children and kindness in the Underground - the fact that these children were about as likely to say hello through a punch as soon as a smile. The girl, though, chose to smile. "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation."

Levi shot a look to Petra, warning her to keep silent. Isabel understood - children like this didn't just overhear. They were here on an agenda. Regardless, Isabel was still shocked to hear the next few words out of the child's mouth.

"Do you need a place to stay?"

***

"Do you think, even for a single second, that I'm going to sit here and take this trash?!" You raised your eyebrow and smiled, although the action was more of a teeth-baring act more than anything.
Olyver, however, had gotten very used to you over the two weeks you'd been together. "Put your teeth away," he snapped.

You grinned wider.

The two of you stayed that way exactly three seconds before you both cracked up, a laugh bubbling its way up through your throat.

"I mean it though," Olyver insisted, grinning so widely that it looked like it hurt. "I can't work like this."

"I go through so much," you said, leaning back on your chair, "to get you a broom. And you decide that because it isn't a certain type, it now means the difference between working here and living on the street?" You were in your office, which had originally been the attic of the manor house that was now in your name. Your chair was very sleek, and so you had no qualms about leaning back on it and putting your feet up on the desk that was littered with paper, covered in your handwriting.

Olyver huffed and pouted. "You say that you went through so much. Tell me, dearest - what did you really go through?"

You debated telling him to go and do something particularly obscene, but instead opted to stand up from the chair and waltz around the side, towards the door. Below, in the house, you could hear the bangs and scrapings of children moving furniture that was currently sitting in the front of the house. When you'd gone shopping, two weeks ago, you'd ordered enough beds and pillows for every child here - and then some. It had been easy.

Naturally, you’d had to get money before that.

That had also been easy.

Turns out that the ministers at the bank had valued their lives very, very much. They had allowed you to breeze in, just long enough to figure out which ministers were the most liked, which had the prettiest wife or who was expecting a baby. From there, it was all too easy to threaten just the right person so that they’d let you walk in with Lovof’s very pretty bank credit and sign it for yourself. It had helped that you had all of his paperwork.

But buying beds and blankets hadn't been enough for you. Getting a very tidy sum from Lovof had been a start – but it was not the end.

You didn't let yourself think about the other despicable things that you'd done over the past two weeks - so instead you opened the door wide and began taking purposeful, long strides to the stairs. Olyver, muttering something under his breath about placing a broom in somewhere you couldn't quite hear, followed suit with his hands in his pockets. "Come for a walk with me," you said, beginning the walk down the polished (thanks to Olyver, although you wouldn't admit that) stairs. Children that weren't working were darting around with balls and sticks, much to your cleaner's displeasure.

"If you break a window," he yelled after a group of young boys, "I may just break your toys!"

"We are mean today," you said, smiling at your friend. You reached the front door and swung it wide open.

Then stared.
Then slammed it shut.

Olvyer didn’t even blink. “Did you just slam that door in some of your poor children’s faces just to be meaner than I just was? That’s a low blow.”

“Your face is a low blow,” you snarled, and gestured for him to shut his mouth.

It seemed that more than demons wanted to play today.
The Beginning

“Well, that's a welcome and a half,” one of the demons outside said, his voice very familiar on the other side of the thick door. You could hear Jean's mocking wistfulness as he then turned to whomever was next to him - Marco, most likely - and continued his drawl. “Do you think we have something on our faces?”

“Y/N,” Olyver said, reaching for your elbow. You hadn't realized that you'd been falling, leaning to one side, but of course he had noticed. “What is it? Who are they?”

“We're friends,” a hesitant, tentative voice said. You blanched at the fact that the beasts who had followed you here had brought Christa - Christa - down into the depths of hell with them. You briefly cast a glare behind you at the children, gathered the entrance hall and peeking through gaps, who were obviously hoping for something of a show. They scurried further into the depths of your manor, although you could tell that all of them were holding their breaths. You weren't even sure that Olyver was breathing as you opened the door again and leaned against the doorway.

You'd changed your clothes since arriving here. Now, the black skirt hang in tatters from your waist, although your black leggings covered more than enough leg. Paired with brown laced-up boots and a jacket, you were probably looking a lot better than what they'd seen you as, if they had managed to see you. You were thankful for that as you tilted your head back to look down your nose at all of the people on your doorstep, your eyes fluttering in quiet, joyful disdain.

“What are you doing, Little Snake?” You said, saving a true smile for the little girl. She shrugged daintily before ducking around you to get into the house.

“They were drawing attention from the guards,” she offered, before disappearing to hide among her peers. “I thought we could offer them a place to stay. One of them has muscles.”

You scanned Olyver's sense of disbelief as you snorted. “The one with muscles is called Mikasa.”

To her credit, Mikasa offered you nothing but a tight-lipped smile. Olyver whistled lowly as he leaned around you just enough to see the beauty of a girl, before you hit him in the stomach. As he shot you a look of can you blame me, you sent him the first serious glare that you'd ever given him - and he shut up. With him at your side, you turned again to your visitors. “So what, pray tell, are you doing on my doorstep?”

“This is not your doorstep,” Isabel said, taking an indignant step forward. If you were in a laughing mood, you may have just lost it; why you hadn't expected the girl's first few words to you to be an attitude-fuelled correction to a claim that you'd made, you weren't sure. “This house belongs to Nicolas Lovof.”

“Belonged, actually,” you idly said, raising a hand to brush a phantom speck of dust from your jacket. Two weeks ago, you would have been very confused about Isabel's knowledge of the man; after reading carefully through Lovof's box labelled 'deals', however, there was not much about Isabel's past that you didn't know. "It's now in my name, would you believe."

Sasha and Connie cautiously looked at each other, before the brown-haired girl stepped to Isabel's side. Isabel took no notice, however, as she frowned. "What have you done?"

"The question is, darling Isabel, what have you done?” Isabel straightened at your tone, at the accusations ringing through your words. "You've followed me here. Congratulations. You've
probably run off from the school, getting yourself expelled and hence losing every bit of influence that you had on anyone. So, Isabel - what have you done, exactly?"

Isabel let out a gasp, as though your words had punched her in the gut. But it was Jean who stepped in front of you, his hands free of weapons and his eyes on yours. No one had looked you in the eye for a long while; it was because of this that you allowed him to make it up onto the final step before growling. "What has she done?" He said. "She's found you. She's hated you and cursed your name and hoped to become you. Isabel Magnolia has put all of that seething hatred for the thing you've become in order to find you, so that she knows that even though she hates you, you're still breathing."

"And now she's found her," Olyver said, coming readily to your defence. Jean took half a step back before regaining his hold, looking at the tawny-haired boy at your side. "What were you expecting? Were you expecting Y/N to welcome you with open arms, even though she fully knows that you all hate her so much? Did you want her to have some big master plan to make everything alright for you guys again, so that you don't have to pity yourselves anymore?"

It was then that he moved.

You'd always admired the way he moved - the way his body worked, the smooth movements of his arms by his sides and the elegant way he held his head stubbornly high. It was like water; it was like fire. He was everything - and your world narrowed down, the black blurring everything but his silhouette moving towards you. Unfortunately for him, that raven-haired male didn't know how much you'd watched him before your world had gone to hell.

It was only natural that you knew which fist he was about to send your way from the moment that his left leg swivelled just an inch outwards.

You didn't particularly feel like being punched, even if you kind of deserved it. If you insulted and were harsh to Isabel, Levi - forever her big brother - would step in to protect her. You were unfeeling - a sea of calm was in your head, even as you caught the fist that was heading towards your shoulder and twisted it at an angle. Isabel needed protection - and Levi knew that you didn't.

Levi quickly recovered from his arm, twisting lightly on his foot before bringing his leg in to sweep out your own legs. You watched it in slow motion, faintly interested - before you took a step back, before sending him your own kick. It connected lightly behind his knee; you then hooked your foot around the joint and yanked it towards you, so the male crumpled to the dust at your feet. You couldn't hear anything - but you weren't sure if that was because people had fallen silent, watching you take this powerhouse down, or if the sea had claimed all of your attention.

You were cruel then, stepping towards Levi and bringing your foot inches away from his face - one wrong move, and you could break his face.

But then you caught yourself, tearing away that sea of calm to reveal an ocean of fury.

You thought you would have done it, would have brought that foot down with every piece of energy that you had left. But instead you stepped back, your eyes not budging from where they met his one revealed eye.

A beautiful grey colour, his eyes.

“Bad manners,” you chided. “But my Snake said that you needed a place to stay. Lovely. I’ll sort out rooms for you now.”
"Wai - what?"

Petra looked faintly mortified at the blunt blurring out of words - but you decided that you didn't care. Did you care about these people before? Had it hurt? Had it been worth it? "I said I'll sort out your rooms. It's late and I don't think you could manage to sneak out for at least a week. That's how long I'll give you here. One week."

"And then what?" Isabel said, not moving a single inch to help Levi to his feet. He did that himself, slowly and surely, despite the pain that must have been echoing through his cheek and knee. "What happens after a week?"

"Then I go hunting," you said, before turning on your heel and stalking back into the manor house.

***

"She's insane," Ymir said, before Christa elbowed her and gave a meaningful look towards the door. Isabel sighed through her nose and rolled her eyes, much to Sasha's displeasure. "I don't care if she hears that," Ymir said blankly, ignoring the poisonous looks that both Sasha and Isabel were giving her. "I bet she already knows."

Isabel would reckon that Ymir was probably right. She'd been nothing but remarkably chipper as soon as she and Christa had caught up to them, luckily for them – otherwise they wouldn't have been able to find their larger group after following the little girl to Lovof's house.

Isabel didn't want to think about what seeing Lovof's name did to her stomach. Much less seeing Y/N opening the door instead of the man that Levi had sworn had been placed in jail. Relief had first rushed through her blood – she'd found a place to stay and the girl she'd sworn to follow all in the first day. But then Y/N's face had drained and slammed the door in their faces.

"Isabel. What's wrong?" Mikasa asked, coming to sit beside her at the bed. Y/N had only given them two rooms in Lovof's - her massive house, and the girls had seemingly just gravitated to one, leaving the boys to sullenly enter the other. No one was foolish enough to start talking about the important things, not when the girl had snakes and birds and eyes everywhere.

"Not her. She was right," Isabel managed to breathe. Petra looked up from where she lay on her own bed but caught Mikasa's glare and quickly went back to reading the book that she'd somehow gotten her hands on. "About everything. I was - I needed her to have a master plan. I needed her to still be Y/N when she's not - and that boy was right when he said that I hated her for it."

"I think you hate her because you had to be her instead of yourself. You tried so hard to stop yourself from missing her by becoming and adopting her habits so that you wouldn't miss it so much." Isabel hadn't noticed Sasha coming closer, but the girl simply sat at the foot of her bed, opposite to Mikasa.

"Do you think she hates me?"

It was a childish question, one that Isabel hadn't intended to slip out. But the girls merely straightened their backs and looked at her. "I think that she has every right to," Sasha said, whilst Mikasa remained utterly still. "She has every right to hate all of us, for how we handed her over, for how we doubted her. For how we waited all that time to rescue her."

"Go and talk to her," Mikasa said, simply. "You know where she'll be."

"She'll go to the highest place that she can," Isabel murmured, to herself more than the others. With that information in her mind, the red-haired girl stood up and walked out of the door, not missing
The fleeting footsteps of children as they fled from their place on the other side. She ignored the dim mutterings of the conversation that the boys were having – ‘that bruise looks nasty, maybe you should go and get it checked’, ‘shut up, brat’ and ‘I actually think it brings out the death in his eyes’ - before climbing the shining stairs. As she reached the top, Isabel knew that she'd been right.

The tawny-haired boy sat, cross-legged, outside a door on the top floor. Somehow, Isabel knew that it was the door to the roof - perhaps due to the dim light that barely made it through the gaps in the door. "Hello," Isabel said, stepping towards him. The boy merely looked at her with something like devastation in those blue eyes that reminded her of Farlan.

"Didn't you do enough damage in the courtyard?" He said.

"My name's Isabel," Isabel said, wishing that her throat wasn't so dry. "What's yours?"

"Olyver. I'm surprised that you have such a cute name; I was expecting something like Cruel, or maybe Nasty."

Isabel blinked. "Have I done something to you?"

Olyver stood up then, and Isabel felt the faint quirks of irritation arriving as he grew a head taller than her. "No. But what you're doing to the girl on the other side of that door is cruel. Whatever you're planning to go and do now - that's also probably cruel. Does it come naturally to you, to come to a girl's house and attack her?"

"Don't you dare judge me until you know my story," Isabel said, but her voice was weak, and the boy knew it. "I'm willing to bet that you haven't cried nearly so many tears as me or faced the hardships that I've had to. So until you have, back off."

"And what was this hardship that made you so cruel?" Olyver asked, moving past Isabel to walk slowly down the stairs.

Isabel knew, then, that the boy loved Y/N. "I had to lose her," she replied. She saw that she'd guessed correctly as she watched the boy pause, for a split second, and swallowed. "Who exactly are you, to Y/N?"

She didn't exactly know why she asked - but it would kill her, and another certain male within this house, to hear anything romantic spill from his tongue. Not because Y/N didn't deserve a lover - the girl did. Y/N deserved whatever happiness that she could get... But to hear that she'd taken a boy to her bed would show Isabel just how far she'd come from the proud, cocky girl she'd adored in the first year of school.

"I'm her cleaner."

Isabel took a breath of relief and walked towards the door.

***

At this point, the fact that you couldn't tell who was behind you was depressing.

You could normally distinguish a person by their footsteps, by the catch in their breathing, by their greeting. But perhaps your skills had dulled down anyway - perhaps you were glad. Realizing that your visitor was probably waiting for some kind of recognition, you leaned back from your crouched position and cast a glance towards the door that they'd come through.

Somehow, you were surprised to see her red hair. You'd expected Isabel Magnolia to fall back into
hating you, as she had done a few weeks ago. You'd expected her to fall gratefully into the beds that you'd provided them with and curse your name, as Jean had rubbed in your face.

But instead, she was here, looking at you with green eyes that didn't contain any hate, or anger, or sadness.

Isabel didn't smile, but she moved to sit beside you. "Do you remember how we met?" You rolled your eyes and was surprised to see Isabel's patronizing look in response. If things were normal, you might have laughed - but things were far from normal.

"I remember," you said. "I don't want to think about how dreadful my hair must have been, though." You remembered being so out of breath from the fleeing of your titan home - you remembered how her hair had scared you when you'd caught the glimpse of moonlight on it.

"I didn't pity you," Isabel said, gazing into the ceiling that made up for the sky. "I've never pitied you, not even for a second. I saw you when you were a wreck, with someone's blood all over your hands and your eyes darting around for an escape route. But even then, I didn't pity you."

"And yet you hate me." You looked at her from under your lashes. Isabel sighed, before looking back at you with those stunning eyes and speaking the damning words that you knew, somehow, were coming.

"I think I hated the fact that you loved me enough to sacrifice yourself for me." The world trembled. "I hated that you didn't think of yourself as necessary in my life. You gave yourself up for my happiness, Y/N L/N. And yet you - the genius that you are - you missed out on the biggest flaw in that plan."

"And what flaw was that?" You whispered.

"If I am to be happy," Isabel said, reaching over slowly and grasping your hand. "Then you are absolutely imperative in my life."

You took a breath in and started sobbing.

***

An hour later, it was Isabel and Mikasa crouched behind you on the roof, instead of Olyver.

Not the mansion's roof - no, you were on the opposite side of the Underground to your mansion. Perched on top of the roof, you slid yourself an inch over the edge in order to look directly below.

"I could just push you," Isabel muttered begrudgingly. "If I'm meant to be helping you with surveillance, then you have to move your butt."

You shot her a disbelieving look, before catching Mikasa's eye and shrugging. As soon as you'd told Isabel that you had a job to do today without all of her heart-felt confessions (you'd accept declarations of love later, you'd told her, ignoring how light your heart felt), the girl had merely nodded and followed you out, dragging Mikasa along beside her.

Mikasa was carefully eyeing you at every opportunity – as she should.

"I need to steal his wallet," you said, eyeing the man selling broken metal things at a makeshift stall. "I don't suppose that you two can flutter your eyelashes and make him give it over?"

"Don't you have enough money?" Mikasa hissed, grinning despite herself. "Why would you need his wallet?"
Shrugging, because you knew it would win her over, you flashed a winning smile at the girl. "Are you telling me that you couldn't flirt your way into getting it?"

Isabel groaned, even as she started inching her way back down the drainpipe that you'd all come up. "Alright, miss I'm amazing and can do whatever I want, I'll get your wallet. Mikasa, I'll be the eye-draw. You steal it."

"He worked for that money," Mikasa insisted. "This is wrong."

You whipped your head and looked at her. "This man currently has nothing to do with money in his wallet, because he spent the last of it roughly an hour and twenty minutes ago. He spent it paying four men to beat up some of the kids that he caught around his house - some of my kids. He does not work besides stealing the money that any person foolish enough to pay for his rubbish gives him. I am not doing this for money, Mikasa Ackerman."

And that's how you were currently still lying flat on the roof of the house, surveying the pout that Isabel was giving the man and doing your very best not to laugh. Mikasa had become nothing more than a shadow, but you knew that she was biding her time to slip her hands into his pocket and plant a flat stone that you'd picked up, before taking the wallet. The man, currently, was enjoying the show that Isabel Magnolia was putting on for him.

"And what, pray tell, are all of these things used for?" She purred - boyish, blunt Isabel purred - and leaned close, but not quite close enough for him to see the insignia on the breast pocket of her uniform, as you'd hastily shoved her into a cloak to cover it. "They look so interesting..."

You counted to ten, strictly controlling your breathing so that not a single laugh slipped through your lips. Although you couldn't quite see Mikasa, you knew the exact moment that she'd succeeded in her mission because Isabel clearly did not want to keep up her act for any longer than what was necessary. The minute that her breathing changed from being light and fluttering, you knew the job was done.

"I think that'll be all today, thank you," she said stiffly, dropping all manner of the flirtatious girl she'd been seconds ago. Isabel twisted on her heel, and you knew that she was enjoying herself immensely from the way that she allowed the cloak to flap around her, like a dress of smoke. She stormed off down the street, using the man's open-mouthed disbelief to distract him from the fact that Mikasa was scaling the wall behind him, pulling herself up and over to you.

"Why do you need a wallet that doesn’t have any money in it?"

You cast her an amused, twisted glance. "Just because it doesn’t have money in it, doesn’t mean it’s empty."

***

"You let me get lost!" Isabel seethed, marching back into the mansion with a smarting temper. You suppressed a grin and nodded to Olyver, sitting at the dining table alone with a bowl of soup, watching your crew of three sit themselves down at the long, polished table.

"Did you have a good trip?" Olyver asked Isabel, grinning at her. It struck you that those two had clearly spoken before, because Isabel raised her eyebrow with barely hidden snark.

"I would have done if these two," Isabel said, slumping into one of the many seats with exaggerated ire, "hadn't let me stomp off and get myself utterly lost in these slums!"

Mikasa shrugged delicately, politely ignoring Olyver's open mouthed stare at her pretty features.
"If you weren't so into it, maybe I would have helped you. But it seemed to me like you were just fine on your own." With that, Mikasa helped herself to some of the soup and dug in.

"In my defence," you added, joining her in serving yourself some soup, "I was in such awe of your 'I'm so strong and don't need any help' attitude that I found great joy in watching you get lost." Isabel lazily opened one eye and grabbed a spoon, waving it around threateningly. Before you could open your mouth to make another light jibe, the door to the dining room was again opened and all conversation stopped.

You saw Ymir's eyes widen in disbelief at the frozen laughter on all of your faces, and how Sasha paled at how close you sat to Isabel. However, it was Jean that nodded thoughtfully and stepped forward - or he would have done, if he hadn't had the agility of a table with a broken leg. He tripped rather magnificently, sprawling forwards and greeting the floor with his face. For a few seconds, no one said anything.

"You always know how to make an entrance," Marco sighed, before stepping lightly over the brown-haired boy and seating himself next to you with ease. "I reckon he just wants the attention."

"If he's the Jean that I know, I'd say that you were right," you agreed. Sasha shrugged daintily and followed suit, skipping over the boy on the floor and lounging across from you, Isabel and Marco to sit next to Mikasa.

"It isn't potatoes," she sighed with a morose tone, helping herself to soup, "but I suppose that it'll have to do."

Connie rolled his eyes and nudged Eren towards the table, even though the green-eyed boy was currently howling with laughter at Jean's apparent conceding of life itself, refusing to arise from his tripped position. "You'd think there would be a suitable potato market in a place where sun doesn't exist," you said to Sasha, shaking your own head. "But alas, no."

"It's shameful, is what it is," Connie snapped, sitting next to Olyver (much to the tawny-haired boy's chagrin). "Can you imagine living without potatoes?"

"Truly, a stimulating conversation," Eren said, grabbing Jean's arm and heaving him into a chair. The boy merely groaned in response, allowing his head to fall into his arms to hide the carpet burn smarting along his cheeks.

"Leave me alone to die," Jean's rough voice came through, not moving his head from the nook of his elbow. "I've been through enough humiliation."

"You tripped."

"Shut up, Isabel."

It was easy to slip into the old, comforting habit of eating dinner with friends. Back in school, girls and boys would eat separately within their dorms - but you found that it was easy to forget, as people merged into different groups anyway, eating and talking across the table with ease. Olyver was looking rather uncomfortable at the head of the table - but judging by his frequent glances to Mikasa, seated to his right, you didn't think he was too unhappy. Isabel and Marco gossiped to your left, with Jean and Eren seated next to them.

It was surprising how easy they got on, now - or maybe the rivalry was just as natural as breathing, for them. Sasha, Connie, Ymir and Christa sat on the opposite side, with conversation low but still fruitful. Was it your imagination, or did Sasha not enjoy food as much as she had, once? You shook
your head, clearing the thought as Sasha groaned at the tomato soup in front of her.

Down the other end of the table, Armin and Levi's crew were seated; Petra smiled easy smiles and Armin scanned every inch of your dining room with a sharp and unkind eye - which did not falter, even as he met your iron stare. You allowed the boy to look away first, glancing towards Petra's light conversation with Eld.

Levi wasn't here; he hadn't come with any of them. You'd been so mentally prepared to pointedly ignore him, as well - after Isabel's words had lifted your spirits sky-high, you'd really been ready to face anything. Even the wrath of a boy that you were very confused about right now.

You didn't realize that an awkward silence was spreading across the table until Olyver elbowed your side. You snapped out of your reverie, glancing around sheepishly until you found Eren raise a friendly, exasperated eyebrow at you. Smiling, you shake yourself slightly. "Sorry, I was in another world. Did you say something?"

Eren rolled his eyes, to which Isabel snarled at him for. You had yet to catch onto whatever joke this was but forgot about that query as Eren opened his mouth to repeat his statement. "I said that I didn't realize that you were going to be giving us food as well as a place to sleep."

"I might as well," you said pointedly. "You'll all starve if I don't give you everything."

"We thought we had a chance with two people who lived here for their entire lives until a few years ago," Petra said, shrugging as she cut off her conversation with Eld. "Isabel and Levi lived here with Farlan, once upon a time."

You fixed Petra with a carefully blank look, your true focus on Isabel as she straightened from her comfortable slump in the high-backed chair. She thought that you didn't know, you realized with a start. Her eyes darted around the table, searching, which only illuminated the absence of a person that you'd been trying hard to forget about. "I did know that, actually," you said, smiling widely at Petra. Isabel blinked twice before looking at you, which you were waiting for. You raised a satisfied eyebrow at her.

"You knew?"

"Well, it's one of my duties to know everything about everyone who lived and lives here," you waved a hand lazily, ignoring the warning look that Olyver shot in your direction. Isabel put down her spoon then, sensing the information that hung in the air like a thick cloud, unspoken but overbearing.

"You have duties?" Eld scoffed, glancing nervously at Petra and Gunther before smiling kindly. "What kind of work did you even have to do to be able to afford this house? And to get duties?"

You shrugged, if only because you knew that it would make Jean scoff. "Honestly, not much. I've only been here two weeks, after all."

Armin swallowed before glancing at Eren. "Tell us the truth. Who are you?" You didn't miss how all but Mikasa, Isabel and Jean straightened at the question - at what it entailed. Allowing your lips to part, showing a gleam of teeth, you sketched a bow, enjoying the way that Olyver rolled his eyes at the extravagance.

"I am Y/N L/N, the Ruler of the Underground. Welcome to my house."
"There is no way in hell that you're -"

"Are you actually kidding me?"

"The Underground can't be ruled by-"

"Can you please pass the bread?"

"Why didn't you say something earlier, for heaven's-"

"You've been here for two weeks - two weeks!"

"And that feels like the amount of time I’ve spent waiting for the damn bread."

You laughed at the outbursts of voices and fell deeper into amusement at the sight of Jean's magnificently purple face. Petra, you noticed with no small amount of satisfaction, had not said anything - she had merely shrunk herself into the frame of her chair, as though she were trying to disappear. "The Underground's never had a Ruler before - it's governed itself between thugs and merchants. That just wasn't going to be enough for me, I suppose."

"Why are you doing this?" Isabel asked, sitting straight-backed in her chair. "You're ruling an impoverished society. Congratulations. You're now the one responsible for keeping them all here, where they don't know what sunlight and joy is." You snapped your eyes towards her with a glower, to which she responded by shrugging indignantly. You were about to respond when -

"Don't talk to her like that," a voice snapped from the door. Petra's eyes widened as she beheld the little girl glaring at Isabel, her lip trembling. You smiled kindly at your little snake, which apparently gave her the confidence to walk towards the table with her chin high and a glare on her brow. "Did you know that I was living on the street two weeks ago?"

Marco flicked his gaze to the cautious glances of Sasha and Connie before standing and walking towards the girl. "Were you?" He knelt before her, allowing the girl to feel in control without letting her know what he was doing. You struggled not to smile at the boy, on his knees before a girl four or five years his junior. "That must have been awful."

The girl nodded defiantly. "It was - not that any of you would know." You flicked your eyes around your group, carefully marking which people's faces became just a bit more drawn, more pale - who's past obviously proved the girl wrong in her statement. The girl didn't seem to care, however; she was a wolf on the warpath, a snake on the hunt. "Now, I have a bed and a nearby toilet and training to go to. And if you try to shame or hurt the Ruler for giving them to all of us - you'll have us to deal with. And I think you'll find that we are not the people that you want as your enemies."

With that, the girl nodded at you and flounced her way from the room. Petra glanced at you before standing up and meekly following the girl out, which prompted Eld and Gunther's movement as well. You had no doubt that they were all going to meet up with a raven-haired male and discuss the implications of your title, of your following. Isabel sighed and put her head in her hands; Olyver seemed inclined to check if she was alright before you subtly shook your head at him. The girl would not take kindly to strangers touching her.

Ymir was staring at you. "You - what did she mean about the fact that she had training to go to?"
Jean widened his eyes as he reached for Marco, helping his friend rise from his crouch. "What training was she talking about?"

You shrugged. "The children were on the streets - so I taught them the most useful ways to fight, how to bring down the adults that touched them in less than five moves, how to turn anything into a weapon. Then, after I helped the guard's leader in finding a criminal, she and I agreed that she would send over a guard every afternoon to help with their fitness and training. Normal stuff."

"You're turning children into soldiers!" Christa cried, the shrill titter ringing in your ears. "That's not fair - they should be children, should be playing and living and..." Even Isabel quietened her distress at that, narrowing her green eyes at Christa's ocean blue ones. Marco shifted on his feet sheepishly, and you smiled slightly at those two - they knew what you were about to say.

"Do you like Assassination Academy?"

"It's the one place where I have a home," Christa replied quietly, looking at the floor. "I don't like what it does, but of course I like my home."

"Assassination Academy have been teaching all of us to become soldiers; yet, you don't go and complain to Pixis." You leaned back in your chair, ignoring the stunned look that Olyver was giving Isabel - giving all of you. He hadn't known about your past; he hadn't known that all of you were from Assassination Academy, other than what he'd inferred from your friends' uniform and your lean, toned body. "I'm giving these children a home. I don't think any of you have a right to criticize what I do."

You stood up then and walked smoothly out of the room. You didn't hear anyone following you - which was good. You'd had your fill of their company for now; although their presence filled you with joy, considering where you were a month ago, it was hard to adjust. Snatching your cloak from the hangers, you shrugged it on and gave a farewell wave to the giggling children dotted around the room.

Stepping into the city at night, honestly, was enthralling. Normally you couldn't tell between night and day - there wasn't exactly a sun and moon to indicate the time. But it seemed to you that one could sense it anyway - the presence of something cool-edged and soothing, that you could just feel. It was that fresh feel, of one where you knew that night-time wasn't exactly safe, a flush of rebellion, that thrilled you, that sent your blood dancing.

Your boots made little sound on the streets, but in the eerie quiet of the city, it was enough to dominate the silence of the alley. You kept going, however - where, you had no clue. You just wandered, in and out, dabbling in the power of deciding where to go on the spot.

Your feet took you to a place that you'd never visited yourself, forbidding yourself to make another connection to anyone. But they'd known where it was - and at night, where you didn't care, perhaps your mind had allowed your feet to trace the path needed to end up at Levi's old home.

"It seems," a voice purred behind you, "that I am not the only one doing a little late-night exercise."

It was not a voice you recognized, and that was enough to set you whirling, your arms thrusting into your belt to grab the knives you'd taken to - but the man somehow expected it, somehow knew that you'd turn to the left, and follow through with it. The tip of something cold and very sharp prodded at the point where your back ended and your neck began - began digging in. You froze, knowing perfectly well that no matter how fast you moved, this man's knife would always be faster. "Well now," he said again, his free arm reaching around you to grab and move your arms behind your back. You first tried to tug them back to your sides, but the man hissed and you felt the
dagger pierce the skin. Everything - *everything* - boiled down to the sense of your own blood dancing its way down your spine, into your clothes. "I'll have none of that."

So you couldn't do anything but allow him to grip your wrists behind your back, before walking you forwards. Trapped, with a knife at your back and your hands nowhere near the knives, you stepped where the man wanted you to - right into what had once been Levi's house.

The man kicked the door - which didn't open. Hope flared as you considered how you might manipulate this man's anger - anger forced people to make mistakes - but then another man opened it, from the other side, and that hope shrivelled and died in your chest. You felt the fear settle at the base of your neck, purring like the man behind you was now doing. Disgust warred with outright panic in your head - there were two more men in this house, as well as the man who was now letting go of your wrists to lock the door.

The moment he turned, you whipped your hands for your blades, to grab the hilts -

But they weren't there.

"Looking for something, sweetheart?" You didn't have to look around to know that the man was waggling the knives at you, mocking the ease at which he'd managed to thieve from you. "I think this is all just a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding," you echoed, your throat tightening and making the words sound flat.

"That's right," the man encouraged, placing his hand at the small of your back and moving you forwards - towards the other men. The house was nothing much - very confined, only two rooms that you could see. But your attention went right to the way that the men leered, glancing behind them, their eyes alight and greedy.

To the bed.

Your feet planted, and the man almost walked into you at your abrupt stop. "Hey, now," he said, and you could almost hear how he was smiling. Another man - a blond, scarred male barely older than thirty - came up and grabbed the other arm, using his other hand to untie the cloak's tie around your neck. The black fabric fell to the floor, and that was when you kicked the man behind you right between his legs.

You had planned to twirl and deliver the same justice to the blond one, but he had gripped the other arm so fast that it hurt when he rammed them together at your back. Your legs flailed, trying to regain your balance, trying to kick the original man in the face, but the blond man merely chuckled down your neck and stepped backwards, out of range. You saw, with vicious satisfaction, how the man you'd kicked had crumpled to the floor - his attractive, dark face pulled into a snarl. "Don't you touch me," you said, panic making your voice rocket to new pitches, fervently hoping that the volume of your shriek would bring someone – anyone.

"For that," the third man stated, looking for all the world like he might laugh, "he might just let us have you first, while he recovers."

It was only then that you realized that the man holding you was slowly dragging you backwards - to the bed. As if the third man - a brunette, black eyes - could read your mind, could see exactly how your legs were going to twist and kick, he leaped forward and grabbed your ankles, lifting your feet.

In that second, you blinked.
You were no longer Y/N L/N.

You reached in, scrabbling for that place that housed the beast you’d beaten into submission for your entire life.

Belua rose to your skin with a blistering wrath. She had never been a character that you had played – she was entirely someone that you could become if you loosened enough threads.

And she was glad to be awake.

For a second, you hung there - suspended between those two men, leering down at your body like it was their instant right. You hung there, widening your eyes and forcing yourself to see the things you hadn’t before.

Only for a second.

Then you flipped.

Literally flipped your body, causing the men's wrists to twist and relinquish their holds on your ankles, on your wrists. And once you were free, you were the one in control. You dropped to the floor in a heap - courtesy of those men having weak joints - but soon rolled out of their immediate paths. Then you were up - and the two men across from you had recovered, their arms tensed in front of them like they were waiting for a fight.

Luckily for you - and unluckily for them - your vision had long since transcended to red.

The way you moved was a thunderstorm, a tidal wave, a lightning bolt. You swerved and dove neatly for your knives, discarded like stolen trophies on the counter of the poor, shoddy kitchen. They weren't as balanced as your daggers, but the wicked flash of silver in your hands would have to do.

The men were empty handed - they'd only been expecting a girl, and there were three of them. What use did these two have, other than to grab limbs and wait for their turn? They'd done this before - countless of times, judging by the bloodstains on the bed sheets, and the way that they'd known how to force you into the room. These facts, combined together, made it very easy to saunter forward and swipe your knives through their throats.

As their still-bleeding bodies slumped onto the floor, your ears steadily tuned into the sobbing that was coming from the only man left - the one that had held a dagger to your back and purred into your ear. You turned, your grip on the handles of your knives steady despite the slick blood coating the metal, and took a single step towards him, where he was trying to claw his way towards the door.

You didn't expect the door to fly open when it did; didn't expect to see a cloaked person on the other side, swords held loosely at their side. But it stunned you enough to send your footsteps to a light halt, to allow the man to start weeping in relief and sobbing his thanks.

The cloaked man took all of one step into the room before he cocked his left leg up as high as it would go, and brought it swinging around to meet with the snivelling man's jaw. You heard the satisfying crack of his face breaking and heard the wet patter of blood dripping from the bodies behind you.

"I told them that there were scum in my house," Levi said, drawing back his hood.

You didn't move, even as your body began screaming at you with different sensations, different
feelings. There was anger, there was frustration, there was loneliness - but the ache of your heart, your traitorous, monstrous heart, told you with enough certainty that there was also love.

“I’ve been called worse, I suppose,” you said. Levi shot you a careful glare, and you allowed yourself to feel the certain rush of shame as you scanned the bruise of his cheek. Emotions were the anchor – the thing that allowed Belua to slip back into the cavern that existed inside. “I think there’s something wrong with me.”

“Not your fighting skills,” Levi said, his eyes growing darker as they swept the inside of his house.

“I think that when Annie cut me,” you said, an absent thought sending your own fingers to trace the new scar on the back of your neck, “she actually did establish a titan personality. I think my titan self is in here.” Levi's face did not contort with the hatred that you'd come to expect. His mouth thinned and his eyes glimmered, but it wasn’t with hatred. For a moment, he merely looked tired. “I am not the girl you loved anymore.”

Levi didn’t flinch, but you could feel that your blow had found its mark. “You don’t think so?”

“No,” you said, meeting his eyes. “I know it.”

“You’re wrong.”

"Oh?” You couldn’t help the animalistic twist that prowled over your lips. "Well, tell me more - I didn't realize that you knew more about me than even I did.”

Levi simply rose an eyebrow with disdain at the furious glimmer within your eyes. "If I didn’t already know that glorious temper from the time you were completely human, I’d say that was a trait from the titans.”

You didn't rise to the bait - although he was right in saying that your anger was a song in your blood. You were not going to pretend to be anything other than what you were; if that was an unfeeling, incapable beast, then that was how you were going to act. "But you admit that I’m not a completely human form of the girl that you claim to love?”

"I claim to love?" Levi's eyes narrowed then, hinting at the dangerous ground that you were treading. Honestly, you didn't care. Provoking danger was giving you a rush, was allowing Belua to be buried far deeper than she ever had been since Annie had allowed her to exist.

"I hardly see any evidence to prove the statement," you goaded, leaning back against the kitchen counter. It didn't matter to you anymore that there were three bodies sagging on the floor, blood still gushing from their corpses. What mattered was the feeling in your chest, the lack of the heat before that had scorched through your throat and blistered your skin from underneath. It was the rush of relief that his presence brought, seeing his face and knowing it was somehow alright.

Seeing the person that you love was not a battle cry within your veins, or the wildness that sang in your blood.

Seeing Levi soothed the edges that worried at your mind; he cooled the fury and the heat of your heart. His presence didn't set your heart off racing - instead, he calmed it.

But that didn’t mean that fighting with him set off something inside that made you feel quite the opposite.

“Unfortunately, you ran away before we could really talk about anything,” Levi said, blank. Your lips curled. “You don’t like me stating the truth? That you ran away? That you were a coward?”
“I didn’t have a choice,” you snapped.

“Bullshit,” he calmly replied. “You had a choice, and you chose to run away. It was the first smart choice I’ve seen you make.”

That pulled you up short. “Smart?”

“I was shocked too,” Levi said, smiling a small smile that was entirely cold. “I wasn’t used to someone that would rather play it smart than play it any other way.”

“I can be smart,” you said, pushing away from the kitchen counter. “Just because you can’t read my mind, it doesn’t mean that nothing goes on in there.”

“I know you can be smart,” Levi agreed, quietly. “I’ve always known that. The way that you looked at me for the first time, in those stables, playing that infernal game - I’d watched you assess Erwin in a little under five seconds, with that little frown that you get when concentrating entirely too hard. And then you turned your eyes to me, and I suddenly had the wish that they'd stay there.” You said nothing as he continued. “The next time that I saw you, of course, I threw a dagger at your head. Which was naturally the smartest choice I’ve made in the past year.”

“I caught it, though,” you said, stung.

“You did. I’d thrown the knife before I could even think. And then you caught it, as easy as blinking, and I had to play it off, with Isabel. As if I didn't care - when really, it was all that I could do not to get on my knees and thank whatever talent had been drummed into you.”

“So you threw a knife at me and call it love?” You said, and almost laughed at the sarcasm in your voice.

“I called that basic survival instincts,” Levi said. “I doubt I’ll survive you, Y/N L/N. You are my apocalypse, and you don’t even know it.”

“I am not that girl,” you said, again. It sounded less sure now.

Levi merely gave a knowing look to the men’s bodies that you’d left in a state in his living room. “If you say so.” You gritted your teeth in annoyance, but Levi was doing what Levi did best – he was giving you an out, giving you space to think. And he hadn’t even brought up the fact you nearly smashed his face into the ground with your foot.

“Did you really love that girl?” You asked, stumbling over the words. You’d heard the beginnings of it – that he thought he might be falling for you. But you’d never heard it for definite.

Levi didn’t smile, just pushed himself past you to sneer at the bodies on the floor. “I love the girl that once smirked at me and yelled that she was a dandelion hunter; I love the girl that had enough fire in her veins to challenge me to a race. I will always love the girl who loved me enough to brave my temper, to fight me, to save me.”

The words were everything that you would have wanted to hear a few months ago. They were beautiful.

But they were not what you needed to hear right now.

"I am not that girl anymore,” you whispered. It killed you to say those words, to utter them from a dry throat and have them fall weakly through the silence. But as much as it stabbed your heart and twisted the knife, there were some words that just needed to be said. You weren't that girl, the girl
who thought she could go head-to-head with anyone and still walk away. That girl was just a facet of the whole - that girl had been a princess in the realm of humans, refusing to acknowledge that she was destined to be the queen of titans.

Levi did the thing that you would have never expected - he smiled. “If you say so.”

There was something sincere and in depth about that little quirk of his lips, of the glimmer in his eyes.

“I do say so.”

“You know I’ll wait, though.”

You didn’t have to ask what he was waiting for. He was waiting for her to come back, the Y/N from the past. He was waiting for some miracle to happen.

But still - they were the words that you needed to hear.

*

It was only after Levi dragged the bodies out of his house, dumping them in some forgotten alley and scrubbed the floor with the disinfectant that - over three years ago - he'd hidden under the floor boards that he allowed himself to lock his own house up again. You'd just gathered your cloak back into your arms and had waited outside, not willing to spend another moment in the dirty dark. Levi seemed to be a lot more grounded - somehow deeply rooted into the steps that he was taking.

You’d both wandered around the city, Levi pointing out a few places that he knew, frowning at the ones that he didn’t. You both kept carefully to the shadows, Levi’s hood drawn up and over his face so that no one could truly recognise him. With your own face, it was less important – people were well aware of your status, anyway.

But after an hour of quiet sightseeing, you both ended up somehow wandering back to your own house. As you turned down the corner that would lead right to your doorstep, you were stunned as someone sprinted down the alley with a shriek and flung their arms around you.

You froze for a mere moment, your brain immediately thinking that this was some weird form of physical attack, but then your arms circled the body that had crashed into yours and squeezed. The body shook as Isabel laughed in your ear. "Oh my god, you're okay, you're here, I was so worried, what the hell -"

She pulled away just enough so that you could see the confused look that Levi was giving the both of you. "I left for a couple of hours," you said, raising an eyebrow. "And this is my house, of course I was going to come back-"

"Miss L/N," an unknown voice said behind Isabel. Isabel stiffened enough that you knew that her strange attitude had something to do with this. You patted the girl on the shoulder, and she released you, standing to the side so that you were able to see about seven guards behind her. "We have been sent to arrest you on the suspect of murder."

"They said that you were arrested," Isabel whispered to you hastily. "It's why I was so worried."

Levi ignored her whispers. "Excuse me?" He asked, taking a single step forward - in front of you. "On whose authority?"

"There were reports about a disturbance near a certain house in the slums," the guard said, his hand
going casually to the pommel of his sword. "We went and discovered three bodies with their throats slit - and what a coincidence that you carry the exact category of weapons that would have caused it. Even the newly instated 'Ruler' cannot escape what laws are in place here."

You rolled your eyes. "I made what rules there are, you asshole."

The guard’s eyes were flat enough that you knew he was not exactly a fan of what you'd done to his home. The guards were the position of authority - as such, you hadn't exactly been able to sway their allegiance towards you in any way - yet. "Your own rule proposals have been nowhere near cleared and authorised yet. As of now, I'm going to need you to come with me."

It was true – you may be the self-made ruler through various threats made and the amount of money that was wrongfully in your name, but you couldn’t make and replace rules that easily. You shrugged - people were gathering in the shadows behind you, and you hardly wanted an audience here. "What of my house?"

"Let's get one thing straight - it's not yours, and you know it," the guard spat, regardless of the warning movements of his crew behind him.

"It's in my name," you said lightly, beginning to walk towards them, pointedly ignoring the touch of Levi’s hand on your elbow. "I think you'll find that it is indeed mine."

"We'll see how that holds up in court." Another guard steps to the side of her friend, her hands dead straight at her side. "But until that day, you are going to come with us and spend a little time in prison."

Your nose scrunched in disgust. That place was hardly worth visiting again.

"Like hell she is," Levi said, a dangerous glint in his onyx eyes as he lowered his hood. Maybe it was the growl of his voice, or his body - but the guards straightened up, a flash of fear on their faces. You watched as their eyes scanned his face, and then flicked to the red-haired girl at your side - and paled.

"You-" the guard muttered, beginning to draw his sword. You grinned as they looked at you in something like fear - as they recognized the two people willing to do anything to back you up. Everyone on these streets knew Levi Ackerman and Isabel Magnolia from three years ago - and now they knew about the girl that had managed to get them so firmly on her side. "You're-"

"I am angry," Levi finished, managing to look bored even as the guards readied various weapons. "You think you're the big guys on these streets, bullying and coercing everyone who doesn't agree with you - don't you? Is that because I left, so there was no one left to undermine you for the pieces of shits that you are?"

"There are eight of us, and three of you," the guards hissed. "What are you going to do, Ackerman?"

All of you froze, wondering who was going to be stupid enough to make the first move. Then, Jean's impudent voice arose from behind the guards. "What do you know," he drawled, forcing a smile to your lips. "They're stupid enough that they can't count. There are far more of us than there are of you."

Indeed, the guards turned to see your friends, having the nerve to lean against walls whilst lightly tracing the edges of their weapons with gloved or bare fingers. Mikasa and Eren were in the doorway to your home, and you could just see the silhouettes of the children peeking through the
gaps of their legs, or at the windows. Ymir, Christa and Levi's team managed to take up the majority of the space of the courtyard, despite the size of the place. Jean, Marco and Olyver were at the forefront (blatantly ignoring that instead of a weapon, Olyver was clutching his mop).

As you scanned your back-up team, your smile faded as you realized who you were looking for. Annie, Bertoldt and Reiner would have been here, at the front, if they were who you'd thought they were. But they weren't here.

That hurt, somehow.

"Do you deny killing those men?" The guard said, his tone insolent even as his eyes widened in barely concealed panic.

"No," you answered, and you could have sworn Marco rolled his eyes at the snark in your tone. "It was in self-defence. Surely such moves aren't against the law."

"They were hurting you, were they? Where are the injuries, then?" You could have raked your nails down the stupid man's face for those questions alone, for the way that he raised his voice so that the people behind you could hear perfectly well.

"They were dragging me to a bed," you said, with infinite softness. The world went quiet - your friends' faces paled and their grips on their weapons tightened. There was a beat of silence - the universal recognition of what, exactly you had faced. "I believe your mind can imagine what they were going to force me to do."

"You went out in the evening, on your own, dressed like that," the guard said, even as the female guard beside him stiffened a bit at his words. You bared your teeth with the effort of not going in to punch him. "Did you tell them 'no' at any point?"

"I told them to stay away," you said with a velvet caress. "I warned them."

"But did you explicitly tell them 'no'?" The guard adamantly replied, ignoring the hateful glares of Isabel and your friends behind him. You couldn't see Levi's expression - because Levi hadn't known what those men were doing. He had arrived just after you had managed to take down two of the men - hadn't heard you screaming, hadn't seen you sobbing as they'd dragged you towards the bed.

He was shaking. Maybe he was running through his memories, seeing the bed in the room, wondering exactly what had forced you to snap at the men in the first place. He wasn't just shaking in fury, though - as you watched his fingers clench into a fist and then force them to relax again, you realized that he was trembling with the restraint of not going to kill the guard for his disgusting attitude.

He didn't want to punch him, because there was someone that deserved to hit him more than himself.

Knowing this, now, you stalked around him. You walked steadily towards the guard - and when you were two steps away from his crew, you said with a blank voice, "I am going to hit you." The one closest to you - not the main one, but a different one - didn't do anything as you punched the right side of his temple. You didn't watch as he slumped to the ground, instead turning to face the rest of his friends. "He didn't say no," you stated, before the main guard had a chance to interject.

"No," the next nearest to you said, knowing where this now headed. You gave him a Look. He shrugged, half-apologetic, before you repeated the hit to his temple as well.
"Now, he said no," you said, "but you miscalculated. I don't give a rutting hell what you say. You could say no all day, and I would not stop hitting you. Does your imbecilic brain understand that?"

Levi was at your side before you could hit another one. "Get out, and don't come back," he said. "If I see your faces again, I think you know what will happen."

***

A few days later, the incident was still the most talked about. "Pigs," Isabel spat bitterly, swinging her legs at the bottom of your bed. You were inclined to agree with her, but you were currently lounging near the head of the bed, reading scribbled notes upon pages and pages of writing. "They were absolute pigs."

You were saved answering as Mikasa shrugged. For some reason, people had migrated to your room despite the fact that you'd given them a room for two more days. Over the course of the past few days, however, they’d taken to crashing into your room whenever it so pleased them to do so. "At least you killed the others," she said, and although there were a few furtive looks passed between Petra and her friends, there was a general sense of relief among your friends.

Eren was at your feet, leaning against your legs. You didn't mind that contact – liked it, if you were being perfectly honest with yourself. Eren had been the only human nearby for a long while; at first, you’d kept him at your side. But after Annie, after the scar she’d put on you, you’d had to take actions to make her see that you were a true titan whilst protecting him. So you’d had to force him into a cell, snarling at people that he was a mere tool, that he was more useful alive. You’d fed them information that you’d claimed had come from him, proving that his human mind was stronger in its memory than yours.

You hadn’t allowed yourself any more contact than that.

He’d survived - but not more than that, merely curling at the corner of his cell, never speaking.

The fact that he trusted you enough, even after all of that, to completely show his back to you was reassuring, was calming in the way that nothing else could be.

Not that your friends hadn't tried. Mikasa and Jean were leaning together on the wall nearest the door, their murmuring a low hum within the room. Armin kept shooting them looks from where he was sat on the floor, next to Petra, Eld and Gunther. You had no idea of where Oluo was, right now - probably back at school with Farlan, wondering where his team had gone to. But what was keeping your focus right now was how Connie and Sasha grinned at each other and at others, offering easy conversation. Ymir smiled at none except Christa, nestled in the crook of her arm, but Marco sat at Jean's feet with a tired air surrounding him.

Conversation was easy.

Levi was on the opposite wall to you, leaning into the shadows caused by either the very late night or the very early morning. Although the lights in the Underground stayed constant, it seemed to you that they still dimmed and brightened depending on the time of day - although that was a theory you couldn't prove unless you saw the sun.

"I'll tell you what, though," Eren said, breaking the silence that you hadn't realized had settled itself comfortably over the room. "We haven't spoken about... Things."

People straightened, their unified focus coming to attention at Eren's statement. The implications of his words were many - and there was a blistering wonder at which, precisely, he meant to focus on.
"Things?" Levi said, crossing his arms across his chest and smirking at you. "What do you mean, brat?"

"I mean... I guess -" Eren paused his stuttering and looked down. You glared at Jean, who looked for all the world like he was going to pick on the boy. But it wasn't Eren's fault that he wasn't used to talking with people, that he wasn't used to sharing his thoughts. "Okay. New tactic. We're going to go around and tell everyone one thing - it could be a story, or a memory, or a thought, or a fact - but one thing. And no one's going to argue or fight, unless that is their thought. I guess this is one way we can all - you know - catch up, or something."

"Sounds decent enough," Jean replied, and although Jean couldn't see the effect that his words had on Eren, you could - you saw how his shoulders relaxed, how his head bowed just a fraction of an inch. "Although now we have to sit through another one of Magnolia's monologues."

Isabel tutted from where she was curled at the bottom of your bed. Olyver was stood just behind her, his hand so close to touching her hair, his eyes fixed fascinatingly at her face. "The fact that you've witnessed one of those dramatic monologues is a privilege, horseface."

Jean spluttered, and Eren choked on a laugh. "Just for that," the teal-eyed male said, with an amused glance at her, "you can start, Isabel."

Isabel blushed, then, as everyone looked at her. "Talk about putting me on the spot, Yeager. I guess I could tell you the long story of how Levi and Farlan met yours truly -"

"Big surprise," Connie interjected, earning himself a jab in the ribs from Sasha, "she's going for the long tale."

"Shut it, baldie," Isabel stuck her tongue out at you all as various chuckles broke out. "I had no parents; I'd been on these streets all of my life. I had no friends, no nothing." You met Sasha's eyes then, and both of you could see the pain that each of you felt - about your shared fire-hearted girl, trapped in the dull darkness of the Underground. "Then one day, I found a bird with a broken wing; it wouldn't have lasted long. I tried to sneak past these guards to take it to the surface, but they ended up chasing me through the streets. I was desperate - banging on doors, trying to get anyone to help me whilst I had this bird clasped to my stomach with one hand. Then, one of those doors opened, and I fell through."

"Right onto your damned face" Levi huffed. "Some image that was." His sarcastic words were wasted on all of you, though - you all knew how he loved Isabel as his sister.

"They beat off the guards, and I ended up basically adopting them," Isabel grinned, ignoring Levi's indignant glare. You grinned widely at her, which she returned in full measure. "And I suppose that I could tell you about how we manged to become the biggest, baddest criminals in this -"

"But, how unfortunate for you, you've already told your story," Olyver smoothly interrupted, his eyes dancing from where they were placed on hers. Isabel swatted at him, to which your cleaner merely took a step back and stood next to Jean instead. Jean, however, merely rolled his eyes in unison with Marco and crumpled to sit down at the base of the wall, adjusting his cloak and shirt to be more comfortable. As people began to realize that this would be the rest of the evening, exchanging stories and thoughts, they followed Jean's example - Mikasa sat between you and Isabel on your bed, and Marco climbed into the seat of your desk. Soon, only Levi was stood up - but then he caught Petra's unflinching stare and sat next to her, glaring at Eld and Gunther as they sniggered. "I can tell you a thought about my past, I suppose - it'll be a relief after that long tale," Olyver continued. "I'm thinking about how scared you all are, about being here - in the Underground. But I can tell you that I am not scared. You all are scared, because you have
something to lose down here. You could all forget your memories of sunshine and rain and wind - but I cannot. So... I guess I cannot miss the sky, because you can't miss what you don't truly know."

Olyver nodded at the end of his thought, giving a well-meaning look at Mikasa. The girl's lips thinned as she considered what she was going to say, at what thought she was going to throw away. Her eyes came to rest on the floor, fixing it there as her eyes were suddenly turned somewhere else. "I lost both of my parents when I was just a girl - to some thieves who killed them both after they wanted to take both myself and my mother to a slave trade - or something. It was because of my pretty face, the men said. This pretty face, that I'd done nothing to earn, wrecked my family." Eren had gone straight, his neck jaunted at a strange angle. "I was going to be taken, to be whored out, whatever - until I was saved."

The girl had once told you that she owed her life to Eren Yeager, and at his tense position, it wasn't hard for you to realize who had saved her. You had once pitied Eren, for he was the anchor of sanity for the insane girl that now sat next to you, eyes soft as she remembered the sane, young girl she'd once been. But had you ever spared a thought to Mikasa, to what she'd gone through to become the killing machine that she was today? If her reality was as bad as that, maybe insanity was the only way to make it better.

But you didn't pity her. You couldn't pity her without first hating the strength that her insanity had built into her mind, into her body - and you weren't going to hate her for the strength that had saved her, you and many others.

Her silence was practically begging someone else to talk, to break the horror etched onto people's faces. You scrabbled for something to say, something to blurt, but - "Well, my thought is that I'd just really like people to stop with the entire horse joke," Jean drawled, leaning back and stretching his arms. If he saw the gratification written across Mikasa's face, he ignored it entirely. "It's getting real old."

"Nay, Jean," Sasha exclaimed, "we'll never do such a thing!"

"Was that a 'neigh' pun, for the love of -"

Cackles had broken out at Jean's endless irritation, and Marco shrugged. "I think that I can't really share a tragic memory, or a deep insight to life or anything - but I guess I just want to live life, you know? I want to see things, protect people, help those in need. And I think that if there's ever been a group of people that can manage that, it's this group of people in this room. It's this group of people that can manage to win this for the people, so that people can have ordinary aspirations like 'see things' and 'get a pay rise' instead of aspirations like 'kill all titans'."

Marco smiled at Jean as his friend gaped at him. Connie, however, was nodding. "I think that we're probably the best chance at making people smile again - because once we get children playing in the streets, with mothers who watch unafraid from their windows, and fathers who come home with sweets, we've won. Because we're the group of people, that no matter what has been thrown at us, who are able to laugh."

Sasha gaped at her friend with absolute astonishment, obviously wondering where her friend had managed to bring up such heartfelt words. You were too - regardless of the smile on your face that suggested otherwise. The number of times that you'd laughed at Connie playing ninja, falling from trees and roofs, arguing with Sasha about potato chips... The boy had a quiet kind of strength.

"I guess it's me next," Eren said, and at once the cheerful and quietly optimistic atmosphere faded. People instinctively knew when bad things were about to surface. It was the feeling that settled itself at your stomach, warning you to prepare yourself. "I guess I want you all to know - the titan that blew a hole in the wall of the city, during the time that we were on wall guard? I figured it out
- who it was. Of course, the titan had to know that it was only us on wall guard, and not actual soldiers - so that meant he had to know about us, about our trip. And then he was with us - he told us that he felt ill, and Y/N told him to go and lie down at the barracks."

"Reiner," Connie whispered, sadly.

"Well, this got depressing fast," Ymir grunted, arching her eyebrows at everyone. "I guess my thought is that we're all some manner of beast here - some of us are just prettier than others," she said, winking at Christa and earning herself a blush and swat in the process.

"I think that all of us have different burdens to bear," Christa said, smiling softly at you. "Whether they're crowns or memories, we all deserve to have someone to listen. There's dark times ahead."

All of you smiled at Christa - you all couldn't help it, with the tiny girl. It was at that point that you leaned back into your pillows with a light sigh. "I suppose that I've never really told all of you about - about anything," you said, smiling a bit at your stutter.

"You can have a gold star for that comment," Eren slyly said, and you joined in with the various chuckles that rose in the room.

"I could tell you about how I was born into a family that needed an heir - born into the title of a princess without doing anything deserving of what I was about to go through. I could tell you about the years spent being beaten into becoming the best, best fighter, best planner, best archer. I could tell you about Orion," you choked, willing yourself to not falter. You lightly traced the rim of the iron ring around your finger, knowing that everyone's eyes had gone straight to that piece of ownership. "I could tell you how he was simply my everything - my best friend, my twin in soul, my brother. I could tell you how we were promised to marriage, and I didn't even mind, because he was mine and I was his."

Levi became immovable, infinite in his attention on your face, on your posture. "I could tell you how he went through the operation, so desperate to not change, desperate to not become the mindless beast of the titan. I could tell you how his mind betrayed that wish, and how mine would have as well. But I will tell you instead about my birthday, and how I'd been dreading it all of my life - because I was going to become a titan on that day. I was paraded around all day, fought over and congratulated. I was put in front of a bonfire that night, a doctor brought out to perform the procedure - and how when the bonfire went out, I nearly fell to my knees and worshiped any god that I could. Instead, I used the darkness and the shock of the night to run. My father tried to stop me."

"There's no way that you got away from there unscathed and unseen," Petra murmured, her eyes alight with intrigue and worry.

Isabel gasped in response, and then only faltered for a moment as eyes turned to her. "That night, that I found you - you were covered in blood! Who did - whose was it?"

You swallowed before simply repeating your last sentence. "My father tried to stop me." A beat of silence ensued, as everyone caught onto your meaning and understood it for what it was, what it had been - a death sentence.

"Petra," Eren said, as his voice caught. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "It's your turn, I mean."

The girl floundered for something to say, before meeting your gaze. Her teeth began worrying at her lip, and you could tell the exact moment that she'd found something to say from the way that her eyes suddenly sharpened.
But then that inner fire stuttered, and she bowed her head. “I want to help you, here,” she said. “I know you have some kind of plan, because you always do. And I’ll help you.”

You raised an eyebrow. “I thought you worked for Erwin.”

“I do,” Petra conceded, giving a soft smile. “But he isn’t here right now, is he?”

“That wasn’t what you wanted to say,” Isabel said, quietly. “That wasn’t the thought you need to tell us.”

“Isabel,” Levi warned, his voice low. Eld and Gunther suddenly found the floor very interesting, and Petra gave Isabel a despairing glance.

“What did you need to say?” You asked.

“I don’t need to say it,” Petra hedged.

Armin was the one who straightened. “Say it. It’s better here and now.”

"It’s not what it sounds like," Petra began, but only after you nodded at her. Before the words were even out of her mouth, Levi had stood up, his eyes darkening to a spectacular shade of black. Isabel, too, straightened, her hand somehow reaching behind Mikasa to touch you with a single fingertip. Isabel had always disliked Petra, you remembered - and you'd never once asked why, or thought to find out.

It was then that you knew that you didn't want to listen to what would follow. You didn't want to find out exactly why your best friend had always distrusted this woman.

"I haven't worn the ring for about a year," Petra said quietly, reaching into her breast pocket and drawing out a tenderly folded cloth. Unwrapping it slowly, she revealed a gold ring that matched the molten gold in her eyes and slid it neatly onto her finger, where it sat with purpose. It fit perfectly, looked pretty and simple on her finger – so unlike your iron one. "We had to fake our identities to fit into the school, to become students and not people with fiancés or weddings -"

The girl kept talking, unaware that you suddenly had no idea how to breath. Levi looked at the ring on Petra's finger as though he'd never seen it before, but Isabel suddenly clenched your hand. Mikasa, too, sensed what was going on and rested her hand at the crook of your elbow. "Who?"

It took you a second to realize that you'd been the one to speak, until you saw Armin's wide-eyed warning and Jean standing up, ready to take the news. Petra looked sadly at the ring before staring right at you, tears starting to form in her eyes.

Levi took one step forward, then.

"My story, then," he began, his eyes boring into yours so hard that you could hear the words he was screaming at you - *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry* - but you found, suddenly, that you couldn't care. "You know how Isabel met Farlan and I, and that we became the well-known crime lords of the Underground. But that fame brought the wrong kind of attention; we got given a job. In return for killing a certain someone, we would be given passes to live in the above world, to become civilians again."

"Nicholas Lovof," Isabel echoed. Her voice was hollow - she knew this part of the story - and she had every idea of what was coming next. You knew this part, too.

And yet you had no idea how it linked to the next.
"He wanted us to kill Erwin Smith and retrieve a document that incriminated Lovof," Levi continued, ignoring the stunned looks of everyone on him. Olyver, however, was looking at the male with a certain pitying look. That man alone, other than Isabel, knew what temptation that the passes were. "And we were going to do it - we were that desperate for sunlight. But then Erwin found us first, before we could find him. He found us, shoved my face in the dirt, and said that if we joined his little army, we'd be cleared from all criminal records. It was perfect - the opportunity. We could scarcely believe it as we were taken above ground and given food and clothes. Isabel and Farlan were enrolled into Assassination Academy, and I was employed straight into the army with my own team, all because of my skill," Levi said, motioning to the still people at his side, watching him talk with faces of stone. "I couldn't have been happier - with Isabel and Farlan safe, I could kill Erwin myself and have them not in danger at all."

"Levi," Isabel whispered. This part, then, was new to her. The lack of 'aniki' worried you, absurdly.

"I was going to do it - but then Erwin moved myself and my team to Assassination Academy, claiming that we were just scouting around for new recruits. But then, on a certain Friday night, he brought me to the third floor of the mansion at midnight and told me to look down. I saw a girl who moved like smoke gather her team - a team that contained Isabel, but not Farlan - and collect enough information in fifteen seconds to know that the murder had happened nowhere near the mansion. And Erwin told me about her file - about how she'd been brought up as a murdering, scheming thing, about how she easily dealt in death and knives and blood. And he told me that if I didn't help with his plan, it was a sure thing that I wouldn't be around to protect Isabel or Farlan when the H/C haired creature snapped and tore at them with her claws."

Petra’s eyes still held the weight of her tears and her mouth was locked in a grimace, looking right at you. Olyver was trembling, his hand on Isabel's shoulder, and the only part of Jean that you could see was his shoulders, tense and hunched. "The plan," Petra said, looking at you with tear-filled eyes, "was to make Y/N L/N fall in love with Levi Ackerman. It didn't matter that my father had arranged a marriage between Levi and I a few months after Levi was employed, because of my respect for him - all that mattered was that you... You could..."

Oh.

Suddenly, things made clear, dizzying sense. Levi's fury at your dates with Farlan - they hadn't been jealousy, as you'd assumed, but they'd been fear - fear that you would hurt the boy not just emotionally, but genuine physical pain. And his insistence at playing the game every Friday night - to make sure that you were controlled, that you were supervised. And his statement of 'keep your friends close, but enemies closer' had been so literal and clear that you cursed yourself for not realizing it sooner.

Make Y/N L/N fall in love with Levi - so that one day, Levi could and would be used against you.

Levi opened his mouth again - perhaps to spurt more of those beautiful words that had so nearly won you over mere hours ago - but you had long since stopped breathing, stopped functioning. Jean and Eren were right there, immediately - both saying the same thing. "Get out, get out now."

Eld and Gunther, their faces carefully blank, were standing and grabbing their captain’s arms. Levi only fought them for a few steps, twisting his face to see you, his body yearning towards yours even from across the room.
You met his gaze and shook your head once – a damning gesture.

He didn’t fight his team as they pulled him from the room after that.

Petra kicked the door shut after him and made her way to your feet, where she crouched beside Eren and placed her hands on your knee.

Your friends were all crowding round, touching you, calling to you, wanting to reach you.

You weren't going to be reached.
The Soldier

Two minutes.

That was all that Isabel gave you to sink into your silent stupor.

You stared wordlessly at the door to your bedroom, now shut. Inside, you weren’t sure of whether to laugh or scream or cry. Mostly, it was all three – but only on the inside. Your face was nothing but a mask, covering the raging chaos within. Two minutes was all she gave you before she came and knelt on the floor before the bed - which you only just blankly registered - and slapped you as hard as she could.

It was strange - you heard the smack, and you saw the world whip around to the left suddenly - but you didn't feel the pain immediately. You saw the shock on Mikasa's face as she reached for you, her onyx eyes wide. Even though you knew that she was Mikasa, and that she was your friend, you couldn't help the surge of sudden hatred for those eyes.

And as you contemplated that, the pain came full force.

"What the hell, Magnolia?!" You gasped, reaching a hand up to cup your stinging cheek. Tears came, unbidden, to your eyes as you searched for a red-haired girl at your feet - and then started. Petra and Isabel were looking at each other with open, honest looks - suddenly riveted by what they found on each other's faces.

Jean cleared his throat from where he and Eren were leaning against the door, prepared to block anyone from coming in. "If you two are going to start kissing, let me know - I'll turn around."

"Would you, though?" Marco looked up at him from where he was sat against your wall, watching Isabel with a frankness that was almost scary. "I would have thought you'd have pulled up a chair and some popcorn." You watched as Jean's colour darkened from his normal paleness to a colour that was quite accurate when asking someone to imitate a plum.

Sasha perked up at the mention of food, giving Isabel a subtle warning touch on her shoulder before she stood up and faced Jean with both hands on her hips. "It's hardly like you'd see kissing anywhere else, is it?"

“Old joke,” Connie scoffed.

Isabel broke out of her reverie of Petra then - and used her new-found focus to look at you with a raised eyebrow. "Well, we know that Jean's been kissed at least once -"

You allowed your friends to distract you. "Isabel Magnolia, I am thirty seconds away from killing you and you are not helping!"

You smiled at Jean's embarrassed wail but used the following conversations that people were having to think. At this point, what did you truly know?

You had been the unofficial princess of humans. You had been an excellent student, would have been an excellent soldier. Isabel loved you. You adored your friends, would give up anything to keep them happy.

Anything to do with Levi, though, was a blurry mess.
You had indeed been a mock princess. And what did you want, truly?

The answer to that question lingered on your lips so that you could taste the words.

Human princess. Titan queen.

Petra was looking at you with a mixture of pity and helplessness, and you merely gave her an empty look - even allowing your eyes to flick down to the ring on her finger. It was so bright, so pretty - and when you mentally compared it to the iron band around your finger, it made yours seem so much darker and foreboding. "I know that you've always hated me," Petra said, her voice softly but firmly rising above the chatter of your friends. "But I want to talk to you, now - and only after I've finished are you allowed to make your decision about me."

Isabel cast an assessing glare at her before shrugging and turning to you. You contemplated it, for a brief second, but could you handle hearing more? The last thing you'd heard had knocked the world out from underneath your feet. Had Levi ever truly loved you? When had it crossed from merely being a job to actually caring for you - or had he ever crossed that line?

Sasha stepped into your line of vision, and the righteousness that shone in her brown eyes was amazing enough that you didn't say another word. "It was not Y/N that you nearly froze half to death," Sasha said, and Connie sat up a bit straighter. "It was my best friend and me. So I will hear your story, Petra Ral - I will hear and judge."

Petra drew herself up.

She was no longer the girl you’d known, but a glimpse of the soldier you had once seen yourself – when she’d unleashed the damper on her capabilities and done what she’d been trained to do. To kill titans.

"When Levi, Farlan and Isabel were first brought here, and Levi was the one placed in our team, I knew that he was something else. I won’t deny that I developed feelings for him. But more important than that, I knew that myself and the others were put in a team with him in order to control him in case he went astray - but that turned around pretty quick. A man like that wouldn't have been anything but the leader. I knew that Isabel hated me for it - because I was the one nearest him, instead of her and Farlan, as they were sent to school. After a month, my father came to visit and arranged a marriage between myself and Levi; I was pleasantly happy, I suppose. I had a great amount of respect for him, after all - and there isn't much opportunity for love and marriage in our line of work."

"I knew you had a crush on him," Isabel grumbled, but Sasha kicked her quickly. Petra merely gave her a look before continuing.

"And so, we were engaged - and then Erwin came to me, telling me about how there had been an arrival at Assassination Academy, and how her story had made Dot Pixis worry. Gave him nightmares. He told me that the girl would be jaded, cold and broken - but that the girl would probably know things that could bring titans to their downfall. And he told me about his plan to make her love someone so deeply that she'd come out of that broken shell to share the information. I hated the plan from the start, and not just because he chose the one destined to be mine. He chose Levi because he was the only one who truly didn't seem to care - Erwin counted on the fact that Levi would not fall for you as you would fall for him."

From the start, you'd noted how Levi had kept his eyes truly dull and grey. You'd noted how he was dangerous, and that he couldn't smile; but how many times had he smiled at you?
"I hated the plan even before I knew your name. Y/N. Y/N. The name followed me all of the way to Assassination Academy, where I would be keeping an eye on Levi and an eye on you - I heard the grass whisper it as they danced in the winds, and how the students quietened when they said your name. I hated the plan because I knew without a doubt that it was fundamentally wrong; Y/N would hurt, be hurt even more than what her past had done."

"You knew about my past," you said, your eyes fixed on her. "Then why did you need to read my file? Why kidnap Sasha and Connie to threaten me about my file if you knew exactly what was in it?"

Petra blinked, and looked around at Sasha. The girl was still standing tall, her arms crossed. "I thought of everything I could do to protect the girl, to make it better for her. And so, after you introducing yourself to me and telling me how lonely you were, I thought that if I could make you furious - because fury and isolation work so well - then maybe you'd leave, or do something entirely drastic and get yourself expelled. I thought that if I made you absolutely furious at the system of the school, since it allowed me to do what I wanted, you would leave. That you'd flee from the school and head for the city, and live out an ordinary life where your friends wouldn't be kidnapped by the “special operations” squad and be allowed by the law to be left there. I thought that if I arrested you, you'd be banished for your so-called 'crimes' - and then you'd be forced to leave, and to never be hurt by the plan that Erwin and Levi had thought up."

"You arrested Y/N," repeated Marco, hoarsely, "because you were trying to protect her?"

"Why else would I have arrested her?" Petra breathed a laugh. "Did you really think I'd be that pathetic? I'm a soldier. I've seen more than enough rubbish to cut the pathetic act. In the pit fights, too, I thought about driving you over the edge, thinking about how I could turn on Isabel, even - but then you saved her. You were going to sacrifice yourself and your pride to get yourself out, so that she could continue to be on the trip, so that you wouldn't have to hurt her. And then I knew... I knew you were every bit of what Erwin had said. You were cold, jaded and utterly broken. But you were mending - healing so completely that you didn't even care about your revenge for me in the face of hurting someone that you loved. And how could I tell you about Levi's plan when it would have broken you all over again?"

"You kept telling me," you said, your voice surprisingly steady. "No matter what I did - you kept saying how I was a good person. Why?"

Petra's eyes twinkled. "You told me yourself how alone you were - how your words kept them away. So I figured that a gentle reminder of words would probably reach you, wherever you were; I just told the truth and hoped you understood them as well as I did."

"Shit," Connie blurted. "And I was so happy to go on hating you because of what you did to Sasha and Y/N."

"Sorry to burst your bubble," Petra smiled, but it faded as her gaze wandered to the door and who had recently disappeared behind it. Yours, too - you hadn't realized that you'd been smiling until you also felt Levi's absence like a punch to the chest. Petra moved to sit next to you, Mikasa moving slightly to accommodate for her. "He loved you, Y/N. I think you should know that. Truly, he does - you didn't see how he changed after he met you. You didn't see how his eyes followed you when you were in the room or glared at any boys you were with. You didn't see how frantic he was when we finally got wind of your whereabouts."

"But he let me go," you said.

Petra shook her head. "You made him drop you, Y/N, and you know it. You made yourself water
and let yourself dance through his fingers, thinking that you would be the one hurting more
because of how you would fall onto the ground. But you never considered that - if you were water -
Levi was dying of thirst. So he may have dropped you, because that's what you wanted - but give
him a chance, and I promise you that he'll catch you again."

You couldn't help but let some of the tears fall - because at the start of this, you'd been so sure that
you'd lost one of the strongest allies that you'd had in the world. But you had not truly lost him -
not yet. And instead of losing someone, you'd instead gained an ally so steadfast that she'd allow
you and your friends to detest her for a year instead of allowing you to pay the price of being hurt.

So you reached a hand out to Petra, who blinked twice before she understood. She gripped your
hand, accepting the handshake for what it was - an offer of friendship, of partnership. Something so
simple that it hardly seemed fair, for all that she'd gone through - but you'd never have guessed that
fact from how Petra's eyes welled up and she grinned a gorgeous smile.

"We have a problem now, though," Isabel groaned, standing up and waltzing over to Jean and Eren.
The latter smirked at her as she leaned coyly against him. "The Seven Deadly Sins doesn't have
enough names for all of us! What are we going to do?"

"Are you telling me that we're all part of the same team now?" Jean gaped, glancing at Marco.
They'd just been a pair before, you remembered. And Mikasa and Armin merely shrugged at each
other - they'd always been a three. "I don't want to work with you lot - you all smelt of death and
arrogance."

"Blame Y/N and Isabel," Sasha grumbled. "If it were just Connie and I, it would have smelt much
nicer. Like food."

"Rotten food," Armin muttered, and then yelped as Sasha swiftly kicked his side. "How about we
just have sub-teams?"

"Oh, great adviser," Olyver gasped dramatically, looking as though he was severely confused.
"What the hell are you talking about?"

Isabel and Christa both looked at you with the same bemused expression, but it was the latter that
began speaking to you. "He's you're cleaner, right?" You nodded, earning a glare from said cleaner.
"Is he any good?" You hesitated before nodding again - if only because Olyver gave you another
simmering glare that almost burnt you as it met your face. "Alright, then he can be in our team as
well."

"Still, I'm not quite understanding the sub-teams," Isabel interjected.

"Surprise, surprise," Jean said under his breath.

"There will be seven sub-teams," you humoured Isabel, smiling softly. "There will be a team
gluttony, and a team pride and so on. But they'll all come under the big team of the Seven Deadly
Sins."

“I suppose that way, if we ever get back to school –“ Isabel shook herself, regaining her composure
and grinning evilly at Mikasa and Armin, “when we get back to school, we might actually have
competition. We always mopped the floor with you lot back in first year.”

“Marco and I never particularly tried,” Jean posed, before being elbowed in the ribs by his partner.
“Anyway, we’ve been a team for the weeks of second year. Don’t you have anything nice to say
about that time spent with us?”
“You did fall, once,” Sasha mused.

"I call dibs on not being team Gluttony," Marco called over the general distress, raising his hand energetically.

You laughed. "And since you're all in my house, in my city, I call dibs on deciding on where all of you go. And what the teams will do to help me in the next couple of days that you're here."

"You have jobs for us all?" Mikasa asked immediately, but then leaned back with a curious gleam in her eyes. "Is this anything to do with the wallet, by any chance?"

Shrugging, you stood up from your bed and stalked to your desk, digging into the wallet and withdrawing a slip of paper from the inner pocket. You idly tossed the leather wallet to Jean, who rolled his eyes but still ran a speculative eye into its folds, searching for any money. "It's nothing at all to do with the wallet," you said, managing to sound wounded by Mikasa's accusations. Christa sighed from where she settled herself on your bed, swinging her legs like a child.

"Nothing, my ass," Ymir stated, and Marco elbowed her as Petra and Isabel giggled in unison.

"This is actually super exciting," Isabel said, her cheeks flushed and a grin stretching her face. "I never really considered how cool we were, with the team name 'Seven Deadly Sins,' and all. We're so cool!"

"If that's what you think warrants as 'cool'," Jean replied haughtily, although you could see the sparkle in his eyes as he eagerly waited for you to say your piece, "then I pity whoever you deem as hot. Y/N, if you even think about putting me into a team with her, I can and will destroy you."

"You really think you'd be able to?" Eren said coyly, to which Jean shot him a wounded look. "That being said, don't put me with Jean, please! I don't think that he could handle it..."

You waved a lazy hand, closing your eyes as you ran through the scraps of plans. You’d been planning to do many things – but you’d banked on having time. And on the fact you’d instead be using the children that lived under your roof.

Minor changes, you told yourself. Changes that would fit the task, the team, the people you had that were willing to help you.

Because they trusted you.

“I'm not going to let stupid things like your own choices come into it - each team will have an aim, and a goal, and a matter of steps to complete by the end of the four days you have left. I'll place each of you in a team considering your personality - no matter how deplorable -" you said, allowing your eyes to look over Jean and Eren slowly. "And considering how well or badly you get on."

"At this point, I don't even know if she's lying," Connie muttered feverishly to Sasha, who giggled and gave you a knowing glance.

You allowed your friends to descend into an argument that was in equal measures disparaging Jean and claiming superiority of every other member of your crew. You ran your eyes over the scribbled pages of writing that had taken up your desk, plots and ploys to get what you wanted in the form of scrunched, messy letters.

“I’ve got it,” you said, quietly. It wasn’t until you looked up and allowed yourself to come back to the present that you realized everyone else was eagerly looking at you. “Which team do you want
"to know first?"

Isabel couldn’t contain herself. “Team Sloth!” She said, saying the title that she'd had originally, in the first year. “I'm on it, right? That was my team back when we were all together!”

"Team Sloth will be made up of two people,” you said, sliding your eyes to one of them. Olyver gulped as you smiled evilly at him. "Olyver and Ymir will be on Team Sloth, arranging the movements and activities of everyone else around them. You’ll be setting up a few affairs that I’ll detail you in on later."

"Wha-" Isabel started to say, unease suddenly written over her face. "What about me? Sloth is me!"

"At the time they called you Sloth," Ymir stated, a strange look passing over her face, "I hear you were swathed in blankets. It hardly fits you now."

"And it fits you?" Isabel indignantly said, an argument on her lips - but the words died as she saw how many jumpers Ymir had dumped around her, obviously preparing for Christa but in actuality serving herself. “I can’t believe your cleaner is stealing my job from me. Shut up, Y/N – I know you’re not saying anything, but I can hear your thoughts mocking me.”

“I would never,” you said, affronted. Isabel pulled a face at you as you cast a wounded gaze around – to general disbelief.

“It’s you and me, huh?” Olyver attempted to smile at Ymir, but the glare she was already giving him made him look morosely and deliberately at Mikasa before shooting you a betrayed expression.

“Isabel and Marco will make up Team Envy,” you continued, shooting a wink at Marco. "Their aim will be revolving around the fairness of the Underground and actually getting an equal society around here – since Isabel sounded so wounded by it earlier."

"Impossible," blurted Olyver, but he shut up quickly upon seeing Isabel's cutting glare.

"You think we can't do it?" She said, with a gently caress to her voice that spoke murder louder than any action ever could. She linked arms with Marco faultlessly, the boy looking over his shoulder apologetically at Jean. "I don't quite get why either Marco or myself is in this team -"

"Are you saying you haven't been constantly trying to catch up to Y/N this past year?" Sasha quietly said, as though she hadn't realized that she'd spoken. Isabel fell silent, keeping her eyes firmly away from you and fixed on her. Sasha seemed to sense it, then, that weight of Isabel Magnolia's full attention. "I'm sorry! I'm tired, I don't know what I'm saying..."

"You knew exactly what you were saying," Isabel said softly. "You knew what I was thinking all this time?"

You met Jean's eyes from where they started to shine with - tears? He must have seen the panic settle on your face, because he quickly rubbed his face and trained his features into neutrality - he'd been waiting for this particular confrontation for a while. "Of course I knew," Sasha said, raising an eyebrow. "We were all thinking it. We all knew what you were doing, and we had no idea how to stop you."

"Why would you have stopped me?" Isabel said, her face unusually serious. "Didn't you want me to be the new Pride? I constantly tried to fill that hole left - I thought you wanted me to?"

"We - god, you idiot - of course we wanted the hole filled!” Connie piped up, standing to the left of
Sasha. "But not by you; if you filled that hole, we'd still have one - but this time, it would have been where you were! We'd already lost Y/N - why would we have wanted to lose you too?"

"Oh my god, I'm Team Envy," Isabel whispered, and a laugh burst through the room at the sight of her tugging Sasha into a tight embrace, cupping her face as tears spilled. "I'm such an idiot, oh my god -"

"At least you're you," Olyver said, but shut up quickly at Sasha's raised eyebrow.

You rolled your eyes. "Simply because I know that Sasha is immeasurably eager to learn her team - Team Gluttony, which I know will come as a shock to all of you present. Sasha and Armin will make up this team; their aim is to start being able to provide a reasonable future for these people. These people are starving - you're going to think up ways to fix that."

"I can't believe you've called Armin glutton," Eren choked on a laugh, earning himself an icy glare from said glutton boy. "I know that it fits his desire to learn more, but damn, you had enough guts to say it!"

"I wouldn't say much," you told him smugly, trying not to beam at Armin and failing miserably. "You're on team Wrath."

Several people within the room whooped and clapped him on the back, all events that started to turn his face red with either embarrassment or anger - at this point, who knew? "Serves you right - there is a thing known as far too much yelling," Mikasa said to him, grinning. You smiled at her, which made her shrink back for a moment; she knew what was coming.

"Team Lust will be made up of Christa and Mikasa," you said, your eyes finding Ymir's in the crowd and pointedly ignoring the way that she glowered at you. "Your jobs will include using any means necessary to get us all out of here after everything has happened."

""After everything has happened,'" Jean quoted, his sarcasm clear. "Why have you got to plan everything? Why couldn't you have just been a normal girl in her second year of an ordinary assassination school? I just don't understand..."

Marco elbowed him as you laughed and shot him a vivacious wink. "Where would be the fun in being ordinary? You're in Team Greed, by the way - along with Petra and Connie. You guys will - hopefully - be serving our own personal means, enforcing laws and such."

"You planned me to be within a team?" Petra asked, a smooth smile working its way to her lips. "I hadn't realized that you had such a cold heart, Y/N."

"Your mistake," shrugged Olyver, ignoring the dramatically hurt look that you showed to him - a pout and lowered eyebrows included. "If I'm not mistaken, that leaves just one person without a team - Team Pride will consist of just one person, shall it?"

"Why would you have two or three in a team where just one will do?" You gave him an angelic smile, noting the way that his eyes flew briefly to Isabel and then rested back with you. "Eren - your team will include the rest of Petra's team, so don't worry about being on your own."

"I wasn't worried," he told you, drawing himself up and giving you a confident smirk. The gesture had its desired effect in that you all smiled back at him, until Jean lightly kicked the back of his knee and Eren stumbled slightly, swearing. "Jean, I swear to god you're going to get hit -"

"So Team Pride - you," Marco said, stepping aside for Eren and Jean as they tussled. They continued tumbling on the ground as you all spoke over the sound of their barked curses. "Team

"Thanks for summing that up," Petra said, dryly. "When do we start with our jobs? How are we going to do our jobs? We're no one here, with nothing."

"Untrue," you smirked. "You have me. Everyone can go to bed now, except Teams Lust and Envy. They stay here." Marco nodded to you as everyone glanced towards the clock and cursed at the time. He and Mikasa stood, grabbing Jean and Eren respectively, and shoved various people out of the door. You yelled down the corridor as an afterthought - "be back up here at seven - or I go hunting early!" It didn't matter that seven was only four hours from now; you knew that the people would handle it (at this point, you ignored team Sloth's existence entirely).

"So, great Pride," Isabel sketched a bow before falling back onto your bed. You looked around your room, seeing for the first time how big it was - and how small it had felt with everyone in it. "You called?"

"Your jobs start now," you smiled. You looked at Christa, who was leaning against Mikasa in an effort to appear awake. "Team Lust - I need you to go and interrogate as many as the children as possible and take notes - where the guard's patrols are, how often they appear, any irregularities. We don't want to get caught until the time comes. Use your charm and be nice - these children have been through a lot," you said, liking the way that Christa had cheered up upon the thought of interacting with sweethearts. You didn't bother to tell her that some of these children would sooner give up their pudding than talk to them at three in the morning. "You guys don't have to be up till ten - so do this job quick and then get some sleep."

Mikasa and Christa left, leaving Isabel sprawled on your bed and Marco perched lightly on your desk. "So if Mikasa and Christa are using their charm to seduce children," Isabel groaned sleepily, "what are we going to do?"

"You guys are going to go and buy a house," you smiled, and opened the scrap of paper from inside the man's wallet.

***

"Seven is a useless time to be awake, for heaven's sake and the love of all that's holy -"

"Shut up, Olyver," you heard Jean spit. You were kind of glad that Olyver was fitting in well enough with your friends - especially if Jean had addressed him by name. "I'm trying to sleep against Marco here, and your voice is not helping."

You threw open your bedroom door loudly, causing several yelps from the other side. Everyone was here - not counting Team Envy or all of Team Wrath, of course - and you allowed yourself to smile at that fact alone. "So - who's excited?"

"Define excited," Connie deadpanned, and for a moment you were stunned - you had only heard his voice, and not seen him - but then your eyes found him lying on the floor literally just outside your door. It was a wonder that your door hadn't hit him in the head.

"Eager to cause mayhem, hell - and in Team Greed's case, a little excitement." Jean perked up as Petra sighed through her nose and stepped to Connie's side to drag him into at what could be considered a sitting position. "Team Greed, come in first. The rest of you, wait here for a second."
Jean's eyes scanned your bedroom with more acuteness than you were comfortable with. "The wallet's gone," he noted, causing Connie to wince up at him as he crawled in after Petra.

"What does that even matter?" Petra said idly, stepping neatly around Connie and settling herself against your wall. You shook your head at Jean as he opened his mouth to pursue the matter - at this moment in time, Petra didn't need to know that everything you did had an impact in the long scheme of things.

"You guys are going to go to the market place," you said, ignoring how Petra raised an eyebrow. "I want notes on every single stall that is there - what they're selling, what their names are. One of you can do that - and the other two are going to investigate the rest of the streets. I want to know who steals from who, where all of the stall owners live, if they're legal. You're going to go and get a job – at the dye stall. Secure it, somehow. Be back for dinner at seven - is that enough time?"

Petra started, but Connie leaped to his feet and grabbed both her elbow and Jean's. "Hell, yes," he said, grinning. You ignored the fact that he was only happy because he was going to be surrounded by what little food that there was in the Underground instead of his actual job and nodded towards the door.

"Send in Team Sloth?"

***

You wandered down your own hall with Eren at your side. "I'd pretend that I have no idea why that they're not here," he said, "but I think you know why." You shrugged, ignoring the fatigue that was creeping in on your mind and fogging your thoughts. You'd been up all morning, directing the teams towards their jobs. The only person that had been left as everyone had departed, chuckling and eager to get started within their teams, had been the teal-eyed and messy haired boy at your side.

"Did he not want to come?" You asked, your voice flat.

"Eld and Gunther were threatening him all night," Eren said, yawning and stretching his arms above his head. "They even stayed up in shifts, watching him so that he wouldn't come and visit you."

"Bless," you responded, coming to a halt outside the boy's room. You smiled quickly at Eren before opening the door and halted at the scene inside.

"We can explain," came a weak voice.

You whipped your head to Eren, checking that he looked as stunned as you felt. The wide-eyed boy caught your stare and you both slowly, silently turned back to the scene developing within the boy's room.

Eld and Gunther were there, their backs facing towards you just two meters way from the door, a barricade of pillows in front of them like a waist-tall pillow wall. In their hands, they clenched two pillows each, looking more than ready to sling nasty right and left hooks towards their attacker.

Levi stood like an avenger, stood atop one of the boy's beds, frozen in a weird position. From the way that his legs were splayed apart and his arms were in totally opposite directions, you could guess that he was about to storm his team's pillow fort with a wild flurry of attacks. His face was set enough that you knew he had still locked up the anger from his tale last night in his mind, but the way that his eyes danced told you enough about Eld and Gunther's intentions.
"Alright," you said, slowly. Levi's eyes flew to your face and stayed there, fastening onto your eyes with such readiness that you could almost feel the slap of it. You walked in, pulling Eren - who came unwillingly into the war zone - and shut the door behind you both, before removing your coat. Eld and Gunther wisely averted their eyes as you removed the extra layer, dumping it onto the floor alongside what seemed to be Jean's bags. Levi, however, merely raised his eyebrows and shot a dominant look at Eren, who muttered things that you couldn't hear under his breath. "Let's have a little experiment, shall we?"

"We were just - I mean, he was - we kind of -"

You waved Eld's broken words off with a smile and stepped lightly over their pillow wall, grabbing three abandoned pillows from the other beds. You threw two lightly to Eren, who looked proud after he caught both in different hands and cocked your head at him. He followed you over the wall, before standing next to Levi. "Eren and Levi, your aim is to get out of this room. Eld and Gunther, your aim is to stop them."

"What on earth do you -" Gunther didn't have the time to finish his question before Levi leaped at him, his teeth locked in what seemed like a grimace. Eld dove between his friends, heaving a mattress shield in between them so that Levi merely bounced off of the wall that had not been there a moment ago. Eren nearly laughed as Levi groaned from his position on the floor, but the grey eyed male merely shot him a glare.

"Say one word, brat, and I don't care if you're on my team - I will hit you with these pillows."

"How does he make pillows so terrifying?" You heard Eld whisper to Gunther from behind the mattress, and you heard their tense chuckles. Levi froze for a moment, and you knew why just a few seconds afterwards - it seemed like Eld and Gunther knew how to distract people and draw their attention. One of them flung a pillow at Levi from the left of the mattress, hitting him square in the face - but as it connected, feathers flew out in every single direction possible.

"OI!" You yelled, ignoring the laughter that had exploded from the males of the room. "THOSE ARE MY PROPERTY, YOU ASSES!"

"Oh, shut it, brat," Levi spluttered, feathers nestling in his hair and down his shirt. You had a few seconds of warning before he swung his pillows at you, forcing you to twist down from the bed on which you were perched and onto the cool, stone floor. "Stop moving so that I can hit you!"

"Oh, of course!" You shouted, scrambling away. Near the door, you could hear the scuffles of Eren attacking the mattress wall, which Gunther and Eld were managing to hold up very well - surprisingly. You, of all people, knew how dedicated that boy was when he was given a goal. "Now that you've commanded me to, of course I'll stop moving!"

You heard Levi mutter a string of curses before you twisted, causing his eyes to bulge in momentary panic. He hadn't actually been expecting you to stop. In the process, he was so motivated to catch you that he no longer had any control to stop himself moving - although he tried. You saw him trip and fall, snapping your wrist and throwing the pillow in his face at just the right moment. Levi Ackerman fell to the ground with a pillow in his face, feathers flying everywhere.

Laughing at the sight of his face, you twisted and ran towards the mattress-wall, leaping and kicking it with all of your might. For a moment, you thought that it had given way - but then it bounced back, turning your shout of jubilation into a yell of 'AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHWHATTHEHELLLLLL' or something else untranslatable. You were sent flying along the stone ground, scraping your elbows along the floor and joining Eren behind a
bed, watching Levi recover and retake his stance on the nearest bed to the wall.

"What team are you even on?" Eren panted, his wasted efforts trying to take down the mattress wall taking their toll on his breathing.

You flashed him a winning smile. "Team Pride." And with that, you yanked on the blanket that you'd subtly gripped and tugged it over him, ignoring his strangled yell that you chose not to hear. "THERE ARE CHILDREN LIVING UNDER THIS ROOF!" You yelled at him, gripping the blanket around him so that he couldn't easily escape. You felt him shake with laughter until the absence of other sound alerted you to another ongoing plot.

Levi tackled you, his arms going around your waist and his body throwing itself against yours so that you fell to the floor. "Hands off of my team mates," he said into your ear, his chest heaving against your back.

"Hands off me," you indignantly gasped, flipping your body at the waist so that you were nose to nose, your back on the floor with him above you. His leg came up to support himself, trying not to crush you - but then you both froze, his knee bumping into an area that you would have preferred it not to within this situation.

"Shit, I'm so sorry," Levi said, immediately lifting himself off of you. You scrambled back, a beam somehow working its way to your face. You tried to fight it off until the moment that Levi ran a hand down his jaw and you realized - with a rush of utter delight and satisfaction - that he was blushing. The great Levi Ackerman had his eyes on the floor, his hand covering his mouth and his face red. It got worse as he lifted his eyes to yours with an apology written in them and knew instantly why you were grinning so widely. "You can shut your face right now."

You pressed your hands to your face, cupping your burning cheeks as you contemplated smiling at him.

For a moment, you wanted to.

His own smile and blush faded as he met your eyes. “Don’t say it.”

“Don’t say what?” You asked.

“Don’t say that you forgive me,” Levi said. “Because I won’t accept it.”

“You won’t accept my forgiveness?” You repeated, faintly stunned.

“No, I won’t. I haven’t done anything to deserve it, yet. But I’m going to earn it, somehow.”

“Bold of you to assume that I was going to forgive you,” you said. But you couldn’t deny that in that second, you’d thought about it. You knew that this male, right in front of you, would do anything.

Of course he would agree to make a girl fall in love with him.

Of course he would sacrifice himself and his heart for the sake of humanity.

After all, hadn’t you done the same? You’d sacrificed yourself and the love you perhaps deserved for humans. But as much as you two were the same, sacrificing little pieces of yourselves for the larger picture, you weren’t sure about it yet. You weren’t sure if you could stand to not hate him for it.
“I’m nothing if not bold,” Levi said, his eyes darkening.

“That’s a lie,” you said. “You’re many things besides bold.”

Levi quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Annoying. Short. Stupid.”

“Add “able to murder Y/N” to that list, and I’ll be appeased.”

“Never.”

“Brat.”

“Poodle.”

At some point, the rest of Team Wrath had vacated the room - had left the mattress on the floor. Wise of them - although perhaps they knew that between the two of you, Levi and you could not be separated. Together, you could only be weathered.

You were Levi’s apocalypse. He was yours, too.

Together, you were world-ending.

You knew that. But you knew enough about the world to know you’d miss it, if you allowed you and Levi to be together to destroy it. You tuned back into the real world, seeing the world of white in front of you. Levi was kneeling in front of you, his eyes looking levelly at you with enough steel that you were reminded of a weapon. The window behind him allowed for the lamp outside to shine in, illuminating his silhouette, making the few stray feathers seem almost ethereal. “I missed you,” you said. “When I went away. I missed you so much that it hurt.”

“I haven’t been scared in a long time,” Levi offered. “But not knowing if you were alright, not knowing if you were ever coming back – that was enough to destroy me.”

You liked that sentiment – but you were hurt. The next sentence you offered was damning. “I don’t know if I will ever be able to trust you again - and I’m angry at you.”

Perhaps this is all it would be – offering small pieces of yourselves, talking about the smallest of things, one at a time, until you were both ready.

The door swung open and banged against the mattress. Levi turned slightly to send a death-filled glare towards the person opening it, and you just raised a hand in greeting. It wasn’t as though either of you were in a compromising position – Levi still on his knees with you crouching more than a respectable distance away from him.

"It - it's ten o'clock," a weak voice came from the door, and you fought off the urge to sigh as you faced Christa's small smile and Mikasa's cool mask of amusement. "You said that we had to be up at ten, right?"

“Right,” you said. You stood, dusting your trousers off with a few calculated swipes of your fingers – the iron ring winking at you as it moved in the light. You paused – too long. Levi was looking at it too, now. “I'm not taking it off," you said, beginning to walk lightly towards Team Lust - ignoring the irony of the situation. "It reminds me of how much I have to lose if this plan goes to hell. Plus," you added as an afterthought, "it helps me remember that you're not the only one who’s engaged."
Both of you engaged to other people. His had long been in the works – a matter that was arranged by Petra’s father. And yours, too – longer. Your father had probably been planning to marry you to Orion long before you killed him. You’d been planning to marry him, too.

Both of you, engaged. You, to a beast. Him, to a beauty.

*How poetic,* you snorted to yourself.

You didn’t want to look around as you stooped to pick up your coat. "I want you and your team in my room, ten minutes. Find them and don’t be late." With that, you left him in a room covered in feathers and light, linking arms with Christa and promptly dragging both her and Mikasa away as fast as you could.

{Team Sloth:}

"I don't even have a laziness issue," Olyver protested as Y/N shooed him and Ymir from her office. "Why have I got to be on this team?"

"Shut up," Ymir said blankly, her eyes dull. Olyver had seen enough of the tanned girl to guess where her mind was - or rather, who her mind was on. "I can't believe that I've got to train some children."

"Speak for yourself," Olyver replied. "I'd rather have your job."

"Liar." Olyver shot a glare at Y/N before she ushered a confused looking Team Gluttony into her office and shut the door with a smart snap.

"Well," Ymir said, glaring around at the deserted staircase. "How do we get children organised?" Olyver shrugged, his eyes on the team of three people at the base of the staircase, tugging on their various coats and weapons. Jean caught his eye and waved once, confidence brimming every inch of his person - despite the fact that he was trying to sheath a sword into a sheath clearly designed for a dagger. He flushed furiously upon realizing exactly why it wouldn't go in nicely, gave Olyver a much ruder gesture, and stomped out of the mansion - leaving his team to roll their eyes and follow him.

"Follow me to the plantation, I suppose," Olyver said, his hand finding its way to Ymir's elbow. The girl went still underneath his touch, and Olyver drew his wrist back before he could be bitten. Instead, he gave her a tentative smile and cocked his head towards the door. "I'll tell you everything that I know about the children, and their numbers."

Ymir followed him without saying much at all, walking out of the backdoor to go to the small plantation that made up a back garden. Olyver groaned as he set about preparing it, hacking at the ground with some pitchforks and hoes that Y/N had somehow procured. "This hasn't been tended to in a while," he panted, knowing that Ymir was enjoying herself immensely, watching him sweat. "I don't understand why it has to be now."

"Never mind her intentions," Ymir said, perching herself on top of an upturned wheelbarrow. "Tell me about the children."

"We let them govern themselves, pretty much," Olyver admitted, pausing for a while and resting his screaming muscles. "The only thing that we ask them to do is sign a register with their name and tick whether they're in or out. We get new children every day - ones that have travelled across the entire Underground to make it here. Y/N somehow got beds and toys and clothes - don't even
ask me how, I have no idea - and the children just go about their everyday lives. Some of them fancy themselves as recruiters - they go around and try to spread the word of Y/N L/N's house, which is open to all children. Most train hard with their trainer - the captain of the guards. Others just eat our food, sleep in our beds and spend the rest of the day playing."

Ymir hummed quietly, her foot tapping against the wood of the wheelbarrow in such a way that Olyver knew she was concentrating hard. "When does this... 'Trainer' come?"

"He arrives at three in the afternoon and leaves at five - so the children work up an appetite," Olyver smiled.

"That's useless," Ymir said, much to Olyver's shock. "Honestly - I knew that Y/N was in the top sets, but she never really had to learn the basics, did she?"

"Hey," Olyver said, an automatic defense creeping into his voice. "Take it easy."

"When your children are being chased by thieves and rapists, is that what you're going to tell them? Take it easy? Are you serious?"

Olyver glanced at Ymir as she worked herself back into a frown. She heaved herself up, shooting a famous glare back at the house. "I've got an idea, and you're not going to like it."

"Isn't that a surprise?" Olyver muttered as the girl stormed back into the house, preparing himself mentally for the day ahead.

***

"Line up."

Olyver didn't blame the children for the indignant looks they shot at each other, arranging themselves along the long fence line of the back garden. Ymir had stomped into the house and yelled blue murder until every single child had moved themselves into the garden, waiting for the demon-eyed girl to give them more instructions. But they hadn't complained - they hadn't rebelled or hidden, like he'd expected them to. It seemed that Ymir knew more about the mentality of children than she let on.

"I want every single child that wants to continue living here in this courtyard in one hour - eleven o'clock. That gives you one hour to collect your siblings, friends, acquaintances and bring them here, waiting for my orders. If they don't want to come, tell them that there is no longer any place for them here, eating our food and using our heating for free. You may not want to come back - that's fine. Don't. For those that want to come back, be here in one hour." Olyver did his best to draw himself up and look like he utterly agreed with Ymir's words, despite the fact that he was utterly certain that Y/N would not like this at all. Children were looking at him - knowing his face, knowing that he was one of the adults that provided for them - and nodding, as though they understood that he was unfeeling stone, ready to walk out on these children like all the others had done.

Ymir raised an eyebrow at the stunned silence of the children. "Fifty nine minutes, now. Run along."

It only took thirty seconds for the children to scramble - over the wall, into the house, through a hole in the window - out of sight. Olyver crossed the mossy ground to where Ymir still stood tall, impassively looking along the grass. "There were less than I expected," she said, her voice quiet - knowing, as Olyver did, that whilst they could not see the children that were listening, they were
there. "But I'm going to give them order. I'm going to give them purpose. That's what you and Y/N missed - children don't want just food and beds. It's a good starting place, but it's not all. They want purpose - they want dreams, to learn, to move."

Olyver blinked as Ymir handed him the pitchfork that he'd abandoned just a few minutes ago. She grabbed another one for herself, rolling up her long sleeves, and began swinging it at the dirt. Olyver blinked again at the muscles that bulged from her arms. "We have an hour," Ymir said clearly, despite the exertion that was farm work. "Make it count."

***

Olyver was leaning against the wall of the house, starting to pity the stone-faced girl as she stood alone in the middle of the garden.

The children's hour was up.

And none had come.

Yes, it was pity that was creeping into his tired, tired body. Ymir had been so quietly confident in her knowledge of the workings of children's minds, so sure of herself that this was surely a blow she could not recover from. And Y/N - Y/N had been counting on the fact that Team Sloth could manage the children. He didn't want to think about the look on the girl's face as they told her about their failure.

Because he would be damned before he let Ymir take all of the blame.

Not that the girl had impressed him, or anything. They hadn't even spoken during the hour they'd spent clearing a quarter of the garden of weeds. But it was the quiet companionship that she'd offered, the meek competition that she'd presented that had caused Olyver to value her, in a quiet and competitive way.

Olyver pushed off of the wall, his heart going out to the lonely, quiet girl. "Ymir..."

The girl held up a hand, effectively silencing him. He bit his lip, trying not to cringe at the saltiness of his own skin due to the sweat that they'd both worked up. What could he say to her, to make her understand? To make her feel better? He opened his mouth, having no clue of what to say.

And that was when the back door of the house swung open and the children walked in a quiet, orderly line into the garden. They lined up at the back first, filling the courtyard with a silent presence that was so poignant that it was almost staggering - and Olyver was shocked as they just kept coming. There were faces in the orderly crowd that he'd never seen before - but he couldn't see a single child that had decided not to come. Even the children carrying the infant bodies of their siblings were present - dutifully pulling themselves up straight as they looked towards Ymir.

She'd known, Olyver realized. She'd known that they'd come, and the children had picked up on that confidence immediately, knowing to look towards her as their leader instead of Olyver. As the final child filed through the door and quietly shut it behind them, Ymir allowed a beat of silence to pass over the assembly of children before speaking in her usual blunt voice.

"You're all two minutes late - and you'll make up for it." For a moment, Olyver was scared that the indignant looks of before would return - but there were none. There was just pure steel in the children's eyes. "I want everyone eating breakfast at seven o'clock every morning, ready to be out here for nine o'clock. You can do whatever you want before that, I don't care. But you will be here from nine o'clock until I decide you are ready to go. Do you understand?"
The children didn't hesitate to bellow their agreement, various looks of excitement being passed around. Ymir nodded to herself - and at the gesture, silence ensued. That girl's a monster, Olyver thought.

"I'm going to split you up," Ymir said, her eyes sparkling with unknown energy. "And this is how it's going to work."

***

Olyver sat down for the first time what felt like forever, at just six o'clock, and nearly moaned aloud at the pleasure of resting his body. Luckily, he clamped down on the noise, and settled for glaring at Ymir - who stood just two meters away, her arms crossed.

"You're insane," he said, before stiffening as he realized that he'd said it aloud.

"You have the world's worth of adjectives at your feet, and yet you settle for insane?" She replied coolly. They were both seated on the bench just next to the back door, watching the strange assortment of activities that were taking place. Ymir had organised everything - had placed the weakest children on gardening duty, so that they were struggling with the hoes and pitchforks. Olyver felt another pitying wave come on as he watched them wipe sweat from their foreheads, their eyes trained dutifully on their work.

"They'll get muscles soon," Ymir had said. "Once they've got muscles, they can start training how to use them."

The stronger, more able children were training with the Captain, a man who had taken one look at Ymir and had decided to do whatever she said. She'd even slapped him at one point, where he'd offered the suggestion that they start training with weapons. "The first thing that anyone has to learn," she'd snapped, "is how to move their bodies. How to defend themselves with only their hands and feet and wits."

She'd sent the burlier children out for a run around the entire Underground - stating that muscles were all very well and good, but that they were useless if they couldn't run. They hadn't gotten back yet - and wouldn't for a while, Olyver suspected.

She'd been kinder to the younger ones - sending them on cleaning, cooking and nursing duties after their two-hour fitness work out. "Skills like these are as essential as weapon handling," she'd told Olyver, over his objections that she was going to put him out of a job. He'd been running around after all of them all day, teaching them how to polish and sweep and wash.

Ymir, though - she'd done everything. She'd shown the children working in the garden how to swing, how to ration their energy. She'd even stepped in with the Captain, pointing out his flaws with footwork. Olyver had never seen anything like the monster that was his partner.

It wasn't until the runners trickled back into the courtyard and began collapsing in fatigue that Ymir decided they were done. "That's enough," Ymir called, raising her voice just slightly. "You're all done for today." Those who had enough energy - maybe two or three in total - cheered. Those who were smarter kept their mouths shut, bowed to Ymir and dragged themselves back into the house, readying themselves for the dinner that the others had prepared for them.

"We're meant to be going to for dinner at seven," Olyver groaned as Ymir grabbed his hand and tugged him harshly to his feet. "But I couldn't care less, I need food now."

"I'd argue with you," Ymir muttered, "but I understand."
Olyver shot her a grin, to which she responded with a shaky punch. They staggered their way through the house, quickly amused at how fast the children recovered and were running, shrieking and playing. Climbing the stairs were the worst part - but somehow, they found their way to the dining room that had been designated entirely for them. Ymir didn't wait for Olyver - she just opened the door and collapsed onto one of the seats in the middle, resting her head on the table. Olyver smiled again before shutting the door and joining her, groaning at the soft cushions and at the smell of food that was very close to being served to them, with any luck.

"I hear that you've managed to bewitch all of my children so that they worship you instead of me," Y/N swaggered into the dining room. All of Olyver and Ymir's attention went right to the platter that she bore in her arms, and the steam that was rising from under the lid. "How'd you manage it?" Ymir shrugged, and Y/N's eyes sparkled with amusement as she cottoned on to exactly where Olyver and Ymir were looking. "Honestly," she said, setting the platter down in front of them and whipping off the lid. Olyver nearly cried at the sight of the stew that was revealed, but settled for diving in.

"I gave you the job of training my army of children," Y/N said exasperatedly, watching as Ymir began eating with a vigor equal to none. "Not tiring yourselves out so that you acted like them."

"Shut up," Olyver said, ignoring the fact that his mouth was full of food.

"It's only half six, as well," Y/N remarked, not touching any of the food herself. She settled herself into a chair to the right of Ymir, curling herself into a more comfortable position. "You're early. I'd expected Team Sloth to be late."

"Shut up," Ymir echoed Olyver as she heaped seconds onto her plate.

"I would," Y/N sighed dramatically. "But unfortunately, I think we're about to have company."

With that, Mikasa Ackerman kicked the double doors in with such foul-minded energy that Ymir choked. "Hello to you too," Y/N smiled.
Team Lust:

"I think Y/N's overestimated us."

Mikasa glanced sideways towards her small partner, her eyes assessing. It was noon - just two hours since both of them had meandered their way towards the boy's room after being directed there by a smirking team Wrath. Neither her nor Christa had realized exactly why they were so gleeeful until they had opened the door and seen Y/N and the captain looking very intensely at each other upon their arrival.

The H/C girl had played it off well, smiling and winking at them both before whisking them away, but Mikasa was no fool; she'd seen the fury on Levi's face as they interrupted. "I think she knows far more about what we're doing than we give her credit for," Mikasa replied, pressing her body further against the wall.

The two girls were just outside of the guard's quarters, which were conveniently very near to the double doors leading to freedom. Naturally, the concentration of guards around the exit were going to be very high - and since none of the Seven Deadly Sins had viable citizenship passes on their person, exiting was going to be exceedingly difficult to do, due to their numbers and the faces that they'd come to wear.

"Two minutes until the next patrol," Christa said, eyeing the door. Mikasa nodded back at her, her hands gently reaching for the swords tucked into the sheaths strapped to her back to reassure herself that they were still there. Across the street, Mikasa could just about see the smaller street of the market - the larger street was just two streets down from the smaller. "It's strange - I could have sworn I just saw Petra and Jean just now," Christa remarked, following Mikasa's train of thought. "Is it any use wondering what Team Greed are doing?"

"No use at all," Mikasa replied, pushing off from the wall as the door to the guard's quarters swung open and the next patrol emerged, pulling on weapons and fidgeting with their various items of clothing. She heard Christa's strangled breath just behind her as the girl's cool hand slipped into hers, so that she was dragging Christa just behind her. The guards didn't notice them - just two girls, dirty and hunching, with threadbare clothes and dark cloaks.

Until Christa started bawling.

Mikasa barely contained herself from looking around at the small girl but managed to dull her eyes into the desperate shade that the children had taught them just one hour ago. The guards - three men, one woman - made up the smallest patrol in the Underground, according to the children that they'd spoken to last night and then again just this morning. Mikasa swore never to underestimate children and their knowledge again.

"P-please, sirs and madam," Mikasa stuttered, keeping her eyes low as she dragged Christa up to them. She noted how the men's shoes didn't stop immediately - it was only after, she guessed, they spied Christa's pretty face that they halted and turned towards them. "We need help, my cousin and I... We're desperate!"

She peeked up at the men through her eyelashes, watching how their eyes flicked to each other before dancing up and down both Christa and her. "What assistance do you require, exactly?"
"W-we need a room, somewhere... We were conned out of our savings, and there are no jobs besides... Besides..."

"Besides crime," supplied Christa in her shuddering voice. "We really need help, and we'll do anything in return..."

"Anything?" One of the men said, his voice low. He was swiftly elbowed by the jaded woman, but Mikasa wasn't fooled by her facade - not when the woman's eyes ran over the men and still came to a pause at Christa. "We can offer meagre lodgings here, for a price -"

"We have no money," Mikasa whimpered, forcing her voice to twist. "We cannot pay."

"Not with money, perhaps," the woman said. She glanced to her fellow guards, ensuring their silence - and seeing their approving nods. "Follow us round the back way." Mikasa lightly squeezed Christa's hand as the guards glanced both ways before moving swiftly back towards the barracks, twisting down a darker alley. Before they reached the door, Mikasa drew in a breath, feeling the panic starting to brew.

Y/N hadn't said anything beyond this point. "Just get them to admit that they’re not as good at following the rules about sexual misconduct as they say they are. And then get them into the back alley. Distract them and get them into the back alley. Make them mark your faces."

But now they were in the back alley, and the four guards were going to enter the barracks where they'd be expecting something far more than either girl were willing to give.

As the female guard's hand rested on the rusted handle and Mikasa was sending a quick curse in Y/N's name, a blade whipped out and rested upon her hand with a definitive slap. "And just what," a voice drawled, and Mikasa's blood heated as she recognized Levi's voice, "are you planning to do with these lovely specimens?"

Levi was slipping from the dusted, barred window that was being held open by two hooded men. Slipping out from inside the barracks with a very full bag of something – the lip slightly opening to offer a generous glimpse of the prized and rare citizenship passes.

"We were just offering aid -" the shortest male started to say, before another one elbowed him in the ribs, eyes trained on the bag that Levi hastily drew to a close.

Mikasa wasn't fooled. If Levi hadn't wanted the guards to know what he was stealing, they wouldn't have ever found out. Everything he was doing was deliberate.

"What the hell are you doing inside our barracks, civilian?"

"What the hell are you doing with these two girls?" Levi replied, and Mikasa could practically hear the smirk working its way onto his face – but under his hood, his face was nothing but shadow.

"None of your business," one of the guards spat.

"What would make it my business? Don't you know who these girls are?" Mikasa felt Christa jump as another voice joined the hushed exchange of criminals, the man following Levi out of the barracks. Levi was now right in front of the guards - how he'd gotten there, Mikasa had hardly a clue - and Eren was moving behind them all, his face hidden under a hood. Mikasa hardly knew what to think about her brother; he'd hardly looked at her since she'd broken him out of the titan prison, but he'd hardly looked at anyone besides Jean.

"There is no business to be had here," the woman said smartly.
“You really have no idea who these two are, do you?” Levi said, drawing his voice out to be mocking. Mikasa attempted to look flustered, but this type of work did not come to her naturally. “They’re worth a lot.”

The female soldier looked like she’d had enough – and faintly disturbed about Christa and Mikasa’s worth. The next second, she was drawing her sword with the other hand, seeing as her dominant one was pinned into place by one of Levi's swords. But it seemed that this was entirely what Levi had been waiting for as he turned on his heel and slammed the butt of his sword into her temple, causing the woman to drop like a stone to the dirty, wet floor.

Mikasa barely had time to yelp as arms gripped her elbows, ripping Christa’s hand from hers as another person grabbed the blond girl. Her instincts screamed at her to twist, to use elbows and knees and fists, but Eld's voice found its way to her ears. "Hit me and I drop you." The male heaved her up into his arms, and it occurred to her that Y/N had obviously planned this - and that a kidnapped girl would be slightly averse to being actually kidnapped. So Mikasa did her best to squeal with indignation and flail with terror, as surely Christa was doing somewhere to the left, as they were both dragged back down the street.

She loosely noted Eren slipping past them to aid with Levi's goal with the guards, knowing then that Gunther and Eld were the ones that were dragging them both back into the busy street. As soon as they were out of sight, Mikasa was set down onto her feet, and Eld patted her arm awkwardly. "We've got to drag you now - try not to make noise but look distinctly unhappy. Take your hoods down, let the people see your hair and faces."

"How unhappy do you want us to look?" Christa asked, her voice cracking slightly from all of the noises she'd been making.

"Like there's no more ice cream in the world," Gunther's deep voice said in exasperation. Mikasa attempted to do her best 'woe is me' look as Eld once again gripped her forearm and dragged her through the streets, weaving in and out of paths and roads. She tried to shoot the occasional pleading look towards the people walking by but was slightly stunned at the lack of attention they were gaining. Christa offered up the slight resistance part, whimpering and wriggling her body so that onlookers would make the assumption that she'd want to escape.

They kept up the act until a familiar house swam into view, and their strange party of four entered Levi's house. Eld immediately crossed the room to close the curtains to the windows, whilst Gunther took up a perch by the door. Mikasa sat down next to Christa, who was looking around at the cleanliness of the place with interest. "Did we know about the fact that we were going to be kidnapped?"

“I did not know that we were going to get kidnapped,” Mikasa replied, gritting her teeth. Y/N could have told them -

"Does anyone ever know if they're getting kidnapped?" Eld replied, giving her a soft smile.

"For our first day on the job," Mikasa murmured to her partner, hugging her knees to her chest, "I think it could have gone worse."

"True,” Eren said, walking firmly through the door with Levi on his heels. "You could have had to kill a puppy or something." Levi shut the door behind them, wiping the blood from his swords and dumping the bag he’d carried from the barracks onto the counter.

“I would have refused,” Christa said, immediately.
“Something tells me you would have refused being kidnapped, too,” Eren said, winking at her and sending a smile Mikasa’s way. “But look – you got surprised with me. That’s a blessing.”

“So what’s Team Wrath going to do now?” Christa asked, her eyes sparkling. “And do you guys know what Team Lust has to do?”

"Team Wrath have to earn ourselves a reputation,” Eld shrugged, wincing as Levi tutted loudly. "We have to go and meet up with Team Greed and see which stall has the weakest protection. And then we're going to go and steal from the weapon's stall in the market, and the dye shop, and the clothes store - and then come back and store it all here, before heading back to dinner at seven."

"Oh my god," Mikasa breathed, chancing a glance at Christa. The girl looked as equally shocked as Mikasa felt. "That girl is going to become a crime lord." The onyx eyed girl did not miss the look of simmering pride on the raven-haired male's face at the mention of Y/N, but quickly busied herself with looking at Eren instead. "For a bunch of people running around, breaking laws, you're looking rather happy."

Eren grinned. "You know what they say - why follow the law, when you can instead not?"

Mikasa felt better. “That’s what a tyrant would say.”

Eren laughed. “I’ve been called worse.”

Eld sighed sharply, before slyly opening the door and stepping through it into the streets beyond. He held the door open as Gunther waved at Christa and left, quickly followed by Levi and Eren. Mikasa opened her mouth to say something - to ask about what they were meant to do - but Eld shook his head and tapped his hand on his pocket meaningfully. At Mikasa's understanding blink as she reached a hand into her pocket and felt a slip of paper, the man shrugged and closed the door, leaving Team Lust in darkness. "They seem to be having a great time,” Christa said, stretching.

Mikasa shrugged and unfolded the paper that Eld had probably slipped into her trouser pockets as he'd dragged her through the streets. "Team Lust," she read aloud, claiming Christa's attention immediately. "If all has gone to plan, you've been successfully kidnapped and left alone in a random house - well done. Without asking anyone for help, find your way home for seven - if you make it earlier, wander around a bit more. Make sure people see you, looking lost and helpless - but not guards. DO NOT GET CAUGHT BY GUARDS. Don't worry if you can't make it on time - if you aren't back by seven at the latest, I'll send out some birds to look for you. Lots of love, Y/N."

Christa blew out a breath that Mikasa hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Am I the only one who wants to hit her sometimes?"

Mikasa crossed the room to look at the window, her eyes scanning the numerous people around the streets. "Yes - the rest of us want to hit her all of the time."

***

"It's six thirty," Mikasa hissed, stalking her way through Y/N's mansion's halls. She'd only been into the dining room once, but she knew how to follow the smell of stew. Christa was hard on her heels, glancing down the various rooms to see children flying around with toys or clothes in their arms. "I can't believe it took us the entire day to find our way through the entirety of the Underground."

"I thought we did well, considering the size and everything," Christa chimed in, sounding
annoyingly calm. "A lot of people must have seen us, which is... Good, I suppose."

Mikasa kicked at the double doors so that they swung open with a colossal thump against the wall, causing Christa to flinch momentarily before moaning at the sight of the food inside. For a moment, Mikasa was stunned at the sound that had escaped Christa's lips - until the girl flung herself onto the seat next to Ymir and heaped a plate sky-high with bread and a stew. Mikasa ran her eyes over the three people that were already there - Y/N, Olyver and Ymir, who gave Mikasa an approving look that Mikasa supposed was thanks for protecting her heart. "Hello to you too," Y/N drawled in response to Mikasa's glare, grinning at Mikasa as they both watched Christa stack food with amazement. "Have you been taking lessons from Team Gluttony?"

"No, but we had a brush with Team Wrath," Mikasa said, an insolent tone creeping into her voice as she followed Christa towards the goal of having food. "But you knew that."

"Perhaps so," Y/N smiled, picking at her bread roll.

"Who are Christa and I supposed to be?" Mikasa asked, when her mouth wasn't full of beef. "Team Wrath seemed to be certain that we were worth a lot."

"You aren't particularly meant to be anybody," Y/N shrugged, in that infernally arrogant way that she had. "Guards don’t care about names, really. But now they know that they said the wrong thing around the people that are worth a lot of money. That’ll get them riled."

The room fell silent as Mikasa and Christa forgot all dignity and began stuffing themselves with food, ignoring the amused looks that the other three were shooting around. "Ah," Y/N sighed after a while, closing her eyes. "I think I hear another darling team returning."

Mikasa barely looked at the doors before someone landed a kick onto the middle of it, making them fly open with a gusto that was much similar to how Mikasa had. "What is it with you people and kicking doors?" Olyver moaned, most likely thinking about how he’d have to clean the footprints from the wood later. "Don’t you know that doorknobs are there for a purpose?"

"Doorknobs do not serve for dramatic entrances," Isabel snarled. "I've had to deal with pompous bank people all afternoon, after breaking and entering some houses." Marco was following her - obviously in the process of rolling his eyes. Something the colour of dull gold flashed in her hands as she threw it with all of her might - but having Y/N annoyingly catching it with all of the ease in the world. "But here's your stupid house key."

"Why, thank you," Y/N said, gesturing widely to the food spread across the table. "Food?"

"You don't have to ask and you know it," Marco said, dumping himself into a seat and running his eyes down the table. "Is - is Jean back yet?"

"Take a look for yourself," Olyver gestured down the table. "There is no screaming in the distance, or neighs - he must be pretty far off." Marco reddened with anger, but at the moment, seemed to prefer stuffing food into his mouth rather than arguing.

Y/N opened her mouth with such arrogance that Mikasa almost didn't want to hear her next words. "So, whilst we’re waiting, I don’t suppose you want to know what you’ll be doing tomorrow?"

***

You were utterly exhausted.

You'd elaborated your plan to Teams Lust, Sloth and Envy, and they were now all looking at you
"This plan worries me," Isabel said, running a speculative eye over you. You caught her stare head-on, daring her to voice her question about your physical state. The girl merely shrugged at you as Mikasa stopped eating long enough to reply to her.

"It worries everyone," she said, her voice low. She turned to you. "You know that now that we have this weird alliance, you don’t have to kick us out? We can take longer. There doesn’t have to be a time limit."

"I’m not in the habit of going back on my word," you said, picking a nail. "Besides, a time limit tests my capabilities. Keeps it fun."

"Your sense of fun is severely twisted," Isabel muttered.

"It could be worse," you said, and winced as Christa and Mikasa exchanged a frosty glance.

"According to your ridiculous sense of fun, we only have two more full days left until we have to leave."

"Two days of pure and utter joy," you sniped at Isabel.

Ymir groaned at you both, her eyes on the blond-haired girl at her side. Christa had laid her head down onto her arms, and though you knew she'd been listening to the plan, she was clearly asleep at this moment.

Olyver's eyes sparked as he looked at Ymir and then quickly at the door. It hadn't closed since Isabel had kicked it back open, and so it made the sounds of other teams arriving very obvious - you could hear Jean complaining and Sasha groaning with vital clarity. "Oh, food!" Sasha moaned, before running into the room ahead of Teams Gluttony and Greed. She leaped onto a chair and looked faintly tortured at having to choose which platter of food to choose from first - before giving up and tearing into the bread right in front of her.

"And that's how I know everything went alright with your team," Connie told Armin solemnly, as they entered. Armin gave him a short laugh before dumping at least six leather-bound books onto the table, sending you a glare.

"It's not my fault that I put you in charge of making new laws!" You sarcastically said, holding both hands up.

Jean snorted as he sat next to Marco, who looked quietly relaxed at his presence. "Is anything your fault?" Jean said exasperatedly. You sent him a wounded glance before flicking your fork in his direction - and a stream of swear words erupted from his mouth as the potato hit him in the middle of his forehead. Petra sat herself next to him, her fingers stained with so many colours that it was impressive.

"After some very random people that I definitely did not know wearing overly big hoods knocked out one of the vendors, I managed to pick up the poor guy’s job at the dye stall."

"Tearing them down?" Sasha repeated through a mouthful of bread, sending her friend a wary glance. "As in, Jean?"
“I’m not proud of my actions,” Jean sighed melodramatically, before shaking himself. “That’s a lie, I am. I had to pretend that I was a health officer from above ground, and now I’m talking about the standards of their food sourcing. It’s not hard – their food had mould on it, Sasha.”

Sasha’s nose wrinkled as she scrunched her face in disgust. “This goes against my religion.”

“What religion?” Olyver snorted.

“Sashaism. We worship food daily.”

“This is precisely why I didn’t have you pretend to be a food critic,” you told her sincerely, watching as she poked her tongue at you. “You just love food too much to say that anything is bad.”

“Blasphemy,” Sasha shrieked, but calmed down as Connie shoved another portion of stew in her direction.

“So Greed is making new rules?” Petra queried, raising a slender brow at Sasha. “That’s a cool job.”

You hummed. “Not as cool as Wrath’s job. They get to go around beating up people and stealing things.”

“They did steal from my dye store;” Petra agreed. “The boss was talking about taking it from my pay, as well.”

“Did he take it from your pay?” You asked, trying not to look like it was a dangerous question.

“No,” Petra answered, reaching into her pockets and bringing out a small bag. You nodded in Sasha’s direction, and the brown-haired girl didn’t even look up from her meal as she reached for it. “Not that I mind giving you the money, but what are you going to do with it?”

“Armin’s been at the library looking at the laws,” Sasha answered for you. “I’ve been at the small number of places where there are plots of land for sale and buying them. Y/N had a lot of money after taking Lovof’s entire savings, but she spent a lot of that on beds and toys for the children.”

“Don’t attempt to guilt me for buying beds –“ you started, fruitlessly, to argue. Sasha just waved her fork in your direction and kept talking.

“We needed more to put together a deposit for all of the land. The money that Wrath is stealing, as well, will help.”

"You've been buying land with Y/N's money and the money that Team Wrath have stolen so far?" Petra said, amber eyes fixed onto Sasha.

"Well, yeah," Sasha shrugged. "It wasn't hard – when the men asked me what I wanted it for, I just had to talk about benefits of food and how I was going to grow stuff there. I think I ranted about potatoes for so long, one guy even gave me a discount to get me to shut up quicker.”

"Y/N," Petra said, quietly. You paused, your fork pausing in the act of toying with the food on your plate. "Are you trying to make the Underground self-sufficient?"

"You've been buying land to plant food," Olyver said with equal quiet. "You knew that Ymir and I would teach the children how to farm. You've made Christa and Mikasa become kidnap victims, and you've been stealing all manner of things from a variety of subjects, and you've been making
new laws and taking over the market... And you've bought a house?"

You sat back in your chair before sending a blank smile at him. He shook his head in confusion as Jean asked, "where is the correlation between all of that?"

"Who knows, at this point," Petra said dryly, turning back to her food after a thoughtful glance at you.

You shrugged it off. “How would you all feel about being thrown in prison?”

Isabel sighed. “Honestly, not good.”

“Ignorance,” Jean said. “Jail is actually the number one place anyone wants to go at any one time. Magnolia’s being foolish.”

“Indeed,” you said. You rose from your chair, rolling your eyes at the confused glances around. "I've got something else to do tonight," you shrugged, tugging on black gloves theatrically. "Teams Envy, Lust and Sloth - get up at whatever time you think will be appropriate. Teams Greed and Gluttony - seven in the morning. My office."

And with that, you left them complaining and stuffing their faces as you swept from the room, closing the door behind you with a quiet click.

***

The streets were quiet as you prowled through them - you didn't see a single child on the street as you made your steady way towards Levi's house, where you'd instructed Team Wrath to lie low. It helped to know that Ymir and Olyver both had their subtle ways with dealing with them, in your house - but would a few days be enough to set the children into a routine where they would be comfortable, safe and well-supplied for?

You didn't want to think about the answer or the solution right now.

Climbing the stairs silently, you pressed yourself close to the door, hearing the lack of noise inside. You pouted, knowing that they were well aware of your presence - so no dramatic entrances. Your hand went to the handle, tweaking it slightly and knocking at the same time. One knock. Then three. Then one.

Eld opened it quickly, allowing you to slip quickly past him into the house. You did a steady evaluation of the room, eyes flicking over where Eren and Gunther were playing cards quietly at the table. "Expecting us to have another pillow fight?" Eld slyly asked, standing just to the left of the door. You elbowed him in response, giving him a pointed look that told him exactly where your thoughts were. "He's on the roof."

You gave him a small smile in return, slipping back out of the house and turning right - to where you conveniently knew there was a perfect set of window ledges that were seemingly begging you to climb them. The male breathed a laugh as you scampered up the wall with ease, heaving yourself to sit next to him on the slated roof.

"It's good to keep watch," he said, before you could say anything. "But I'm so stiff - let's go for a walk."

"You watched me climb the house," you scathingly said, watching the male as he led you back down the route you'd taken and onto the ground. "And you knew perfectly well that you were just going to make me go back down?"
"Expecting anything else different?" His words brought a small smirk to your face, and you danced a couple of steps in front of him. "Oi, brat," he said, raising his voice only a few notches, "don't you go running off."

"Why? I don’t fear anything in these streets."

Levi snorted. "It’s not you that I’m worried about. I’m worried about the general citizens."

You gasped theatrically. "How dare you – I’m a delight."

You both wandered throughout the city, once again. Something had snapped – some bit of tension that there had been, before. Now, you felt as though you could have talked for hours. It felt like you were – arguing about everything under the sun.

"Roses don’t even smell that pleasant," Levi tried to reason with you, after several laps around the centre of the city.

"You’re a male, I wouldn’t expect you to understand the pleasantry of smelling nice," you sniped. "Roses are lovely."

"Females," Levi said, disparagingly. "Always on about some kind of flower."

"You use rose perfume yourself, Levi, don’t even deny it."

"That’s to scent the room after I finish cleaning it. It has a practical use."

"You and cleaning. That’s the true romance, right there. Or is it just you and the mop?"

"The mop had a really nice figure. None could blame me."

You laughed, and even Levi looked like a frown could possibly be fought from his expression. "Let’s go and give your team some orders for tomorrow."

"Please tell me we aren’t kidnapping any more crying girls."

"Mikasa cried?"

"She did her best. I think I heard a whimper." Levi steered you down a side alley, rolling his eyes as you lightly bumped into a wall and scraped your fist. You pouted as you looked over your lightly scraped knuckles, running your fingers around the iron ring as a point of habit. "I hate that ring."

"I'm not taking it off, I've already told you," you said indifferently. "Jealous?"

Levi scoffed. "Considering that I've fought the titan, not really. Why would I be jealous? He has nothing that I want."

"He has me," you reasonably said, cringing at the sight of the house.

"No one will ever just have you," Levi disagreed. He then slowed down, looking shocked at his own words, and you sent him a vacant smile as you thought of something to reply.

You settled on a joke. "Scared, Ackerman?" You teased, spinning on your heel to look back at him. For a moment, you only saw his face - his unguarded, easily smiling face. But then your vision expanded, and you saw a dark figure behind him, a hat worn low so that their face was covered. As you focused on the figure, you vaguely saw Levi's face fall into confusion, and the figure looked
The man's face was scowling at you and you mentally knew that something was very, very wrong. His coarse dark hair - or what you could see of it, under the hat - reached his neck, and the beard only twisted the unhappy sneer of his mouth into something cruel.

"Of course not," the man answered, quietly - so quiet that you had to read his lips to know what he'd said. At the sound of his voice, however, Levi finally turned around to see the object of your attention.

Levi sucked in a breath, which was all of the hint that you got to know that Levi also knew something was wrong. Your hands crept for the handles of your knives. "You," Levi hissed - and though you couldn't see his face, you knew the expression that was creeping onto it. You knew that his eyes would be dead, careful - building an icy, frowning mask that signified nothing was wrong or out of his comfort zone.

"Me," the man replied calmly. "I wanted a word with you."

"I wanted a word with you too, a few years ago, but you left me," Levi spat, before tightening his stance. Already, he'd given and shown too much emotion for his mask to be worth much in the situation. You had no idea who this man was - but you knew that the other men, creeping up behind you, were certainly part of his plan.

Stooping abruptly to scoop up a stone, you flung it wildly in their general direction. The men laughed as they watched it soar over their heads to hit a window above them, utterly useless as a weapon. You refused to let yourself blush, giving them time to get close to you before you twisted and your knives flashed out, ready to tear out throats or limbs - but a squeal stopped you. Christa blinked a few tears away, the man holding a sword to her throat sneering at you. You glanced around, searching for any other hostages that the man had managed to get, but Christa was the only one. Catching the look on the hat-guy's face, you sent him a look layered in death as you sheathed your knives, Levi not moving beside you.

"Don't you look at me like that, sugar," he said. You stiffened at the pet name, and as he shot a look towards Levi, gauging his reaction, you knew he'd seen enough to know the feelings between you both. He knew enough about them and about Levi to know that silly, stupid little territorial remarks would have an effect. "I just want to have a chat with Levi Ackerman, here. You," he said, running his eyes over both you and Christa, "are just an added bonus, shall we say?"

With that, the man pushed off of the wall, stalking his way through the street with such confidence that he clearly knew where he was going - and with limited resistance. Levi, much to your surprise, didn't wait for you as he followed the man. He just stood tall and vaguely unfeeling. You turned to the men and gave them such a violent stare that they let Christa go with minimal effort, the girl falling against you in relief. As you looked at her with questions in your eyes, you were utterly shocked to see the lack of feeling on the girl's face. 'Christa?" You said, and the men that had been surrounding you laughed, before walking after their leader.

"I'm fine," she answered. But she wasn’t – you could feel the fear riding off of her, as palpable as anything physical. The men sniggered, looking back at you – knowing that you’d follow them, because Levi had.

"His name is Kenny," one of the men said, knowing that you'd listen.

You did listen - but understanding was still far from reach.
Kenny’s name meant nothing to you, but from Levi’s reaction to the man, it was going to carry meaning very soon. He led you three to a world of even more darkness.

Kenny reached a house that you didn't recognize and waved his men through, eyeing Christa as she went in without a fight and smirking at you as you followed with even less of a bite. The men had clearly been here before - they went straight towards the bookcase and tugged it open to reveal the stairs leading downwards into a dungeon.

You ignored the strain that the sight put on your soul.

Kenny closed the door firmly behind you all and led the men's merry way down those stairs, seemingly content in the darkness. Levi hung back by just a few meters, letting the back of his hand whisper against yours as you both held your chins high and descended into the dark.

"Welcome to my borrowed parlour," Kenny said, revealing what would have been a pleasant room under a different set of circumstances. He gestured towards one of the two seats, which Levi begrudgingly fell into, and sat himself in the one opposite. "Obedience does not come naturally to you," Kenny said, surveying Levi coolly. "So, I'm just going to prepare your reward if you're a good boy."

The men surrounding both you and Christa cackled as they all reached towards you as one, their hands touching every part of your body that could be used as a weapon. Your knives fell to the floor as one of them disarmed you, and you snarled and kicked as much as you could before your legs were also grabbed and lifted. You were half in the air as Kenny huffed a sigh and got up, stalking towards you.

The next thing you knew, you were being held up by the men and there was a deep silence in the underground parlour.

You could feel the blood trickling down your temple from where Kenny had hit you, with the stick that had now been placed against the arm of his chair. You weren't sure how long you'd been out for, but you doubted that it had been long - Levi still looked furious enough to blow, so his anger had yet to be taken out on someone.

"I wanted to talk to you," Kenny said, simplicity ringing through his voice – or was it your headache that had that effect? You could tell from his patronizing tone that he'd tried to open with this just moments before. "After all, you've been Underground for nearly a week - and you haven't come to find me? Honestly, I'm almost hurt." Levi said nothing - his lips were pressed tightly together, as though he could simply kill Kenny by looking daggers at him. "If you're not going to have a chat with me, boy, I will just turn my attention to one of my other guests."

Levi nearly glanced at you - you saw that in the way that his head tilted just a fraction before he realized what a stupid move it would be. "What could you possibly want to talk about?"

"What have you been doing?" Kenny pressed, leaning forwards in his seat. "What is your aim? What are you going to do?" At Levi's answering smirk, the man raised a walking stick that had been resting against the chair and traced it down Levi's jaw threateningly. "Don't test me."

"I can only answer two of those questions," Levi said, his voice wonderfully blank. "What have I been doing? Whatever my leader wants. What am I going to do? Exactly that, again."
Kenny huffed a laugh. "And who is your leader? Or are you still panting after that man who pinned you down into the dirt? I should have known that you were the submissive type." You sniggered but hid the sound as soon as Kenny eyed you. "Or is it that your leader," he continued, getting up from his chair and walking around to stalk somewhere behind you, "is none other than our own Ruler, right here?"

Kenny must have signalled to his men somewhere along the way, because the men hanging around the outskirts of the room practically pounced on top of Levi and held him in his seat. Hands were on his wrists, on his thighs, on his shoulders. One man even dared to get a strip of cloth and force in between his teeth, causing Levi's eyes to spark with feral rage. You stamped on your assailant's foot abruptly, your eyes on nothing but Levi, as you tried to get to him. But your movements were slow and sluggish, courtesy of the blow that Kenny had bestowed on your head.

"I'd shut up if I were you, girl," one of the men whispered in your ear, chuckling as you shivered in disgust. You yelped in outrage before headbutting the closest person to you. Their hands dropped your shoulders as the owner yelled, and you would have twisted had another man been ready to catch you and return you to the stranglehold in which you were unable to move.

Levi yelled something through his gag, but you couldn't understand it. Neither could Kenny, apparently, as he laughed. "I'm just going to assume that those words were for your leader. You didn't care this much for the eyebrows guy... Is it because this one has other assets?"

You flushed, tossing your head with as much dignity as you could muster. "Erwin Smith is one of the greatest leaders in this world."

"Is he now?" Kenny replied smoothly. "Better than you?"

You summoned all of your attitude and raised that infamous eyebrow at him, despite the fact that blood was dribbling from the cut at your hairline and you were being wrestled into position by five men. "No one's better than me," you purred.

Kenny seemed satisfied with that answer. At a curt nod, his men relinquished their grips on your body, and you were standing tall, only having to look up slightly to meet Kenny's gaze. "Perhaps you could answer my questions?" He asked, offering you his hand. You merely looked at it with disgust curling your lip as you stepped your way towards the seat opposite Levi. You kicked the man holding Levi's gag in place at the back of the knees, meaning that both the man and cloth fell away.

Levi could barely stop himself from spitting but held his tongue at the sight of you sprawling in Kenny's chair. "Who is my leader? No one, although I'd follow Erwin to the ends of the earth to do whatever he thought needed to be done. What have I been doing? I'm currently talking to an utter idiot with limited intelligence. What am I going to do? Destroy him as soon as I am able."

Kenny blinked. "You'd follow Eyebrows anywhere, huh?"

"I've seen first-hand what that man can do, and how his plots come together," you replied. "There is no one better to handle my talents."

It was true enough. You owed the man, anyway, for answering your call of aid both when you had first given yourself up and for retrieving you from the titan's grasp. You had never doubted his power – and you'd allow him to use you before perhaps turning around to bite him.

Kenny didn't seem remotely interested. "Ah yes, your talents. Everyone knows that Y/N L/N is their Ruler... But my question is if they know exactly who you are."
"I doubt it," you said, ignoring how your veins filled with ice. This man – he knew about you, despite you knowing nothing about him. "They'd hardly allow me as a Ruler otherwise."

"I doubt that," Kenny said as he threw a book onto the table in front of you. You ran your eye over the title idly, ignoring how Levi fidgeted in his chair. "Seeing as you are literally rewriting the laws of this place so that everything you could ever want to do is legal."

You feigned innocence, even as Levi's eyes flared with panic. "The sacred and original book of laws is dated, old, and has been locked away in the library's most secure manuscript office. How the hell would you expect me to break in, alter it and write the correct kind of language needed to make it acceptable?"

The answer lay in the way you’d gotten Armin to scope out the library beforehand, planning to use Sasha’s dexterity and Armin’s general smarts - but Kenny didn't have to know that. "And you've been buying the land that hasn't already been dug up for housing," Kenny snarled, leaning against the wall. "I don't suppose that it's any coincidence that the current food market has been ripped apart by a very respected and knowledgeable critic – so that when yours begins to produce food, it’ll be the more popular option?"

You shrugged. "Not my fault that I wanted to try my hand at employing the unemployable for farm work." Jean had done such a good job impersonating a wealthy lord from the above world so that all of the people had turned away from the food market. Of course, those who were starving were still visiting it due to their lack of having another way to eat - but with the food that people were growing under your employment and in your new fields, that would soon change.

You could practically feel Kenny's wrath. "You come down to this deplorable city, take it over and try to make it legally viable? This festering pit of sin is meant to stay that way, and I don't appreciate all of my usual clients turning away from me and making me lose my business!"

"You should have had a more tasteful business then," you smiled angelically, catching Levi's eye and enjoying the look of shock on his features immensely.

"You have no idea who I am or what I do," Kenny said, invisible threats scorching your skin. "I should kill the girl for your impudence." Christa was dragged forwards, and Kenny eyed you speculatively. He knew something about her, you deduced. He knew something very big about the beautiful girl that was now cowering on the floor - and now he wanted to see if you knew it, too.

"Kill her?" You pouted, giving the girl a cold glance. She'd changed from the quiet terror that she'd been projecting just a few minutes before - she was now giving you a wildly terrified look, but as she bit her lip and lowered her eyes, you realized that she trusted you. She trusted you to get her out of this, despite the fact that you hadn't planned this and you were already bleeding. "I believe that I have a far more respectable personality than you do with the guards right now, Kenny."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Kenny sneered, his lips drawing back over his teeth.

"That girl is wanted by the guards as a kidnap victim," you said, sadness drawing into your tone. "Would you believe? Someone successfully stole her away as she was asking for help - as well as a lot of citizenship passes from the guard's barracks. I was even asked to help look for her today... Unbelievable. They want to find her so that they can find the kidnappers."

"What... What are you talking about?" Kenny asked. You didn't miss the way that Levi began to show signs of understanding what you were saying; his eyebrow twitched in that way that told you that he was annoyed that he hadn't figured your antics out before, and his lips were pressed together in such a way that you weren't sure if he was stopping a grin or grimace.
"I'm talking about the fact that if you spill just one drop of that girl's blood, the guards and I will make your life here absolute hell. They trust me far more than you - and do you really think that it'll be hard for me to convince them that you were the kidnapper? That you were the one to steal several citizenship passes to get your ugly, stupid crew out?" Kenny, for the first time, looked as though he had absolutely nothing to say. "It's okay," you said, playing with the knives that you'd sneak back into your belt the moment you'd been let go. "You tried to play a game with me, and you lost... I'd suggest getting used to it being that way."

"For you to report us, you have to get out of here alive," Kenny said. His men, letting go of their charges, managed to scrape their ruined bravado back into grins and threatening waves of their weapons.

"Then it's a shame that we have back up as well," you sighed, dramatically shaking your head. "And it was going so well for you, wasn't it?"

"I was wondering where we were going to come into this," Eld's voice sounded from above, causing many of the men to anxiously shift on their feet. "You certainly know how to make us move fast, Y/N."

“A little tip,” you told Kenny, injecting venom into your voice. “When I throw something, I don’t miss.”

“She threw a stone over our heads,” one of Kenny’s soldiers muttered. “It hit a window instead of us.”

“Not just any window,” you crooned. “A very particular window where I knew some men would be waiting for any sign of trouble, seeing as their two leaders had already been gone for an hour. Of course they’d notice a stone hitting the window. Of course they’d rush to look – and what would they see? Their two leaders being led unwillingly away?”

Levi picked himself up from his chair, crossing the room to help Christa to her unsteady feet. You banished the slight flickers of jealousy that the sight of his fingers touching someone else's skin aroused.

You had no business being jealous.

He wasn’t yours.

"Let them go," Kenny said. The men parted, unhappy with their leader's defeat but unable to do anything about it. You led Christa up the stairs, the girl gripping your hand tightly as you went. Levi, however, hung back. You let the girl go at the top of the stairs, allowing Gunther to hold her tightly, before tapping your lips with a finger. Praying that the stairs were not loose, you lightly stepped down them enough to stay out of sight but within hearing distance. "You wanted to know where I went after I left you on your own, did you, boy?"

"I don't care," Levi coolly replied, but the performance was lost on everyone. All of you had heard his words from mere minutes ago. You evaluated what you knew about Levi’s life before - not much. You knew he’d been in the Underground with Farlan and Isabel, creating chaos everywhere that they went. Then the giant mess of Erwin Smith and his plans had dragged him elsewhere... But before that? Before Isabel? Nothing.

“You don’t care, do you?” Kenny sniggered. “And I thought you did, after I took you in. I gave you those skills, boy.”
“My mother was dead,” Levi snapped. “You took me in just because it was convenient. Don’t you try and convince me feelings had anything to do with it.”

Kenny waited a beat before saying his next sentence with the same venom that you’d spat at him. "The woman on the bed was not your mother, boy."

Levi laughed, but it was a hollow sound. You bit your lip at the torture in it. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

"She was not your mother."

"She wasn’t, was she? I can’t be assed to listen to this. You’re mad. I saw her corpse."

“You saw a corpse that was so decayed that you were traumatized for weeks afterwards,” Kenny mocked, and you heard Levi suck a breath in. “If you weren’t so stupid, boy, you’d have realized that the body you saw wasn’t your mother’s. If you had been a little less of a complete, sickly child, you’d have realized it was a titan. My guess is that she came to seek your mother out, since titans only feel lust and your mother... Well, boy, you knew that she was a prostitute. That’s how you and the others came about, anyway."

You flinched. Levi might have had years to get over that reality, but you felt the bite behind the words. To be a child not planned, not brought about by love but pure lust... It didn’t matter to you in the slightest, of course. But for Levi to have that past constantly dragging behind him almost hurt you.

"You’re wasting my time to tell me shit that I already know?" Levi dryly said. "Well done."

"Don’t you patronize me when I’m telling you things," Kenny chided him. "I had a look at the corpse for longer than you could stomach. The thing had a scar on the base of her neck, and there was a lot of blood on the bed. My guess is that your mother didn’t want to service the cannibal in the way that she desired and fought her. I suppose she won, if her own body wasn’t anywhere near – but Kuchel disappeared."

"So?"

"It’s just information, boy,” Kenny laughed. “I would have thought you would have been smart enough to collect that sort of thing, by now.”

“And I thought you would have grown out of being a cynical old bastard.” Levi’s voice was flat, a blade, a dagger poised to cut through whatever rubbish Kenny was saying. His tone was so entirely dead that you could taste the fact that he didn’t believe Kenny for even one moment. Kenny, however, seemed to be on a roll - he carried on with his words of insanity.

“A cynical old bastard that saved you and had the guts to look at a corpse without getting completely messed up in the head.”

"I was a child!” Levi snapped, raising his voice. Kenny crowed in delight - at the miniature game they’d been playing, at who would lose their temper first. "I was young and scared and on my own!"

"You still are a child! You don’t see how you’ve moved on from being manipulated by that Eyebrows monster to a completely different beast – like the one that was sent to murder your mother after enjoying her services. I’m trying to make you see that.”

“You’re trying to manipulate me into helping you with whatever task you want doing,” Levi
corrected. "That means nothing. That does not mean you are telling me the truth." You glanced behind you, at the empty room. Team Wrath had gotten Christa away safely, hopefully back to Levi’s house... Or yours. You looked back at Levi, at the adamant shield that was apparent on his face. Levi then turned sharply on his heel and climbed up the stairs, his pace so perfect and calm that he maybe even fooled Kenny that he was utterly fine.

You saw that it wasn't true.

But even though you saw it, you saw him, you still scrambled silently out of the way, behind the bookcase door. As you'd gambled, Levi strode out of the house without so much of a glance around. When others had an ego that could rival yours, they were easy to predict.

You waited for Kenny to sound out his impatient sigh and - as you'd hoped - climb the stairs after Levi closed the door firmly. The moment that Kenny rounded the corner, you drew a knife across his neck and pressed just hard enough to make him choke in surprise. "I should have known that the Ruler had dirty tricks," he rasped, holding his hand out to his men to tell them not to move.

"I just wanted to have a little chat,” you said, sweetly.

“And we need a knife across my throat to do that?”

“I think I’d prefer you as close to death as I can get you,” you replied. “Besides, it’s a pretty knife.”

Kenny huffed a slight laugh, the movement making your knife bob on his throat. “What did you want to have a chat about?”

“Many things,” you said. “But first things first – you said that there were others? Besides Levi?” You didn’t have an option to wait to ask the questions later. Was it even your business? Why were you asking on Levi's behalf?

“Kuchel was a prostitute, young Ruler. Levi wasn’t the only brat she had.”

You hummed, panic rising in your throat. “Why was there a titan in the Underground?”

Kenny coughed. “I reckon that was because they wanted to turn the people down here and storm the city above. That would be the smartest move, in my eyes. There’s whispers about titans gathering in a certain corner of the city, even now.”

“Why has it been going on for so long? If they’ve been here since Levi’s childhood?”

“You don’t take over a city without an army,” Kenny remarked, with scorn rising in his tone. He tensed his back, indicating that he wasn’t going to happily stay with your knife at his throat for much longer. “I think they were collecting an army. Turning humans and the scum of the streets into titans.”

“And you think Kuchel – Levi’s mother was one of those? Being turned into a titan?”

"I think many things, but that is indeed one of them. After all, I never found her body." After hearing the smile through his words, you push Kenny away in disgust and step towards the door. Now that your dagger was not near his throat, he looked a lot more regal, almost. "Mark my words - she's somewhere. Kuchel wouldn't have died that easy. Whether or not she ate the other kids she had or turned them too, I don’t know."

“Other kids?” You repeated.
“Did you really think that a prostitute working in the Underground would get away with only one unplanned kid? No, of course not.”

“You wanted to know what Levi is doing – what I am doing. Why?”

“So many questions, little Ruler,” Kenny said, leaning against the wall. “Be careful with who you ask.” You didn’t bother to reply, allowing the silence to become suffocating. Kenny looked faintly delighted as he closed his eyes, his lips quivering as he tested the words before actually saying them. “This is still my city. I still have business here – one that you would do well not to wreck.”

You contemplated that. “What about you and I agree to a deal?”

Kenny’s obsidian eyes began to gleam. “I’m listening.”

After a few minutes of you elaborating on a few – only a select few – of your schemes, and working out a few numbers, you were both in agreement. You asked one more question, desperate for some solid information what didn't involve 'what if's or 'I bet's. "Who are you to Levi Ackerman?” You knew that he had taken the boy in - but would a man like this have done that without any ulterior or pure motives? Kenny walked towards you and pushed you against the door, his hand slipping behind you to press on the handle. You fell out of the doorway and into the street, still looking nowhere but at this despicable, clever man's face.

“Well, now - if I told you that, I'd have to kill you. And that’s an awful way to stop our new partnership, don’t you think?”

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“What the hell have you done?”

It wasn’t how you were normally greeted by Connie, but at this point you were so exhausted that you couldn’t care. Glancing around the normal hall of your home and noting the number of jackets slung onto the hooks, you surmised that Levi and the rest of Team Wrath had indeed gone back to Levi’s house instead of your own as you’d ordered them to.

“How the hell did people manage to get Christa?” You snapped, storming around Connie and Petra to hurl yourself up the stairs, heading into the wing where you knew the girls’ room was. You knew without a doubt that they were following – Connie’s fury was a palpable aura. “They took her – “

“What in the-“ Isabel started, opening the door to the girls’ bedroom and narrowing her jade eyes at you. “You – what have you done? We’ve been waiting for you for hours to come and explain yourself-“

“How did they take Christa?” You interrupted, finding Ymir easily.

She was very much not looking spectacularly pleased at you. “They took Jean first. Then a different group claiming to be the police came to claim Christa. She only agreed to go with them because we thought it was one of your plans. Where is she? Was it not one of your ideas? Is she safe?”

It was the largest number of words that you’d ever heard leave Ymir’s mouth. You growled. “No, it wasn’t one of my ideas. She’s meant to be the bait – what good would leading the bait here do? Nothing. Idiots. But she is safe now.”

It was relief that was flooding through your veins. Christa had looked fearful upon seeing you and
seeing your confusion at her being there – the ultimate proof of her capture not being part of your plans. But she was safe – back with Team Wrath, at Levi’s house.

“You don’t get to call us idiots,” Connie snapped. “Not what you’ve done to Jean.” He emphasized this as he clicked his fingers in front of your face, which you would have normally responded to with borderline violence. It was a mark of how truly tired you were that you merely blinked at the furious face he was making – fear making his eyes flare wide. Petra hung back, leaning against the polished doorframe. Her eyes, too, were flickering with the first traces of a professional – blank. Carefully interested. But Connie then stepped in front of her, forcing you to focus on him again. “Come back down to earth, Pride. What have you done?”

“Nothing completely out of character,” you said quietly, calming down.

“You told him to take a walk before you left,” Connie said, his voice heightening in pitch as fear took its toll. “And you know full well what was going to happen.”

“He’ll be fine; that part, I did plan,” you said, winking tiredly at the children creeping back into their rooms, deliberately going slowly past this particular bedroom door. A day under the care of Olyver and Ymir had taught them not to waste their energy.

“He is in jail!” Connie cried, causing Petra to lose her balance and stumble against the door before shutting it smartly. “He went out and got himself arrested!”

“He was seen tearing down the food courts and running errands that shouldn't have been run,” you said. “I made sure of it; the guards are everywhere, looking for Christa, Mikasa and the passes that their captors stole. Did you really think that there was the slightest chance that they wouldn’t see what you and him were doing in the market? They need a scapegoat, someone to take the attention of the people away from their shortcomings. Does it matter that they lost a few passes to thieves? No, because they caught a man trying to ruin the food economy. Their priority will be Jean and punishing him – and not on a few thieves trying to escape.”

“We’re going to get out of here at the cost of Jean’s freedom?!” Petra cried, stepping forward with her eyes blazing in anger. “I thought you were better than this – why would we even want to get out if we have to leave one of our own?”

You groaned as you snapped your gaze around to look at the others. Marco stood up from where he’d been sat against the far wall, and you looked down to the floor, ashamed. It had been the thought of his reaction that had made you unsure of this part in your plan, but there was no way around it.

Isabel didn’t even try and stop him as he walked closer.

“What did they say about Jean?” He asked, his voice scarily soft. You caught Mikasa’s eye from where she was coolly watching the exchange and shook your head – if Marco wanted to throw a punch, you’d take it. You deserved this much for not telling them everything first.

“Jean’s in jail after being arrested,” you said, leaning against the doorframe in order to cover up the urge to collapse onto the bed that Sasha was currently lying on, watching everything with barely disguised woe. “It is going to be alright.”

Marco’s eyes erupted with fury. “Jean is in jail.”

“Yes.”

“He’s the distraction whilst we get out.”
“Yes.”

Marco drew himself up as tall as he could, and you were suddenly struck as you realized how much he'd physically grown since a year ago. "I refuse. I will not go without him - and you are a kind of cruel, vindictive scum to think that I would."

He threw open the door and jerked his head at the opening, Connie and Petra sympathetically standing aside, but you were damned if you were going to leave without the final say. If he'd punched you, it would have hurt less than those words he'd spat. "There was a reason you were on Team Envy."

"You should have stayed with the titans," he merely said.

He then stormed from the room himself.

You firmly strode out of the room, following him to the stairs. It didn't twig for a few moments that he was leaving your house - but when it did, your eyes snapped open and your mind awoke from the dead state that it was in.

You whirled around to find that most people had followed you both out, wondering whether to interfere. "Sloth and Isabel," you said. They hadn't been fooled with your performance - they knew that you were almost a dead girl walking. Olyver and Ymir stood upright immediately, heading towards the door. "He cannot go near that jail. Stop him any way you can - get him back here for tomorrow morning. I don't care how, just do it." As the three moved out on quick heels, people left in the corridor gave you hasty glances. None of them were happy about Jean's situation, you knew - but Marco's words had shocked them into pitying you. You weren't overjoyed at the prospect of them following you out of pity, but at this point you'd take what little you could get.

"Mikasa" you said. "I need you to go back to Levi's house and stay the night there with Wrath, re-join forces with Christa. Don't be seen, not yet. You should know why." Mikasa nodded, getting up and casting her eyes on Ymir's retreating back. It was very well that Ymir hadn't heard your order, otherwise you'd have been forced to acknowledge that the freckled girl could have easily ended up on Team Envy along with Isabel and Marco.

"Everyone else can just leave me alone for a few hours," you groaned, heaving yourself upstairs to where your loft room was waiting – with a bed. "Please."

You barely registered the world moving around you and the sight of your bed looming in front of you before the blackness swooped in to claim you.

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"Whatever time it is, I'm telling you that it's too early." Regardless of your words, the incessant knocking on your door didn't falter until they heard the thud of one of your knives finding its way to embed into the wood. You blearily opened your eyes and glanced around your room, glad that you were alone for once. In a house of this size, it was hard to find time alone.

Your window was open, and the noises of Olyver and Ymir training the children below rose to your hearing. It was nice that they got on well with the children, you dozily thought. Hearing the sheer determination in the grunts of the children trying to fight with poles or planting, you heaved yourself out of bed, pulling on trousers and a blouse before opening the door to a grim Sasha.

"You did say seven in the morning," she shrugged, leading teams Gluttony and Greed into the room. "It's now eight."
"Eight?" You squinted at her, trying to mentally the amount of sleep you'd gotten - or lack thereof.
"Right. Doesn't matter."

"What does matter to you, then?" Connie said, with a surprisingly cutting edge to his voice. "It clearly isn't teamwork and friendship."

You waved your hand, sleep still forcing you to sway on your feet. "Nor did it to you when I was stuck in a titan castle for months. But if I can look past that and stomach the sight of you, you can shut up and do what I say for now."

Petra huffed what might have been a laugh and stepped to your side. She grabbed your elbow as you leaned into her, craving the stability of her body. "All teams are doing whatever you've told them," she breathed into your ear as the rest of the people stalked into the room, idle chatter covering up the noise. "But none of us are happy. I hope you know what you're doing."

"Don't we all," you groggily smiled. Petra looked faintly alarmed but patted your hand. You hadn't realized how much you had been craving physical contact lately - even her arm wound with yours was making you feel better than you had in a while. "Right, Petra, you have the dye market. I need blond, black, brown and a red dye, enough for four people with medium length hair. Finish working and then sell the stall at the end of the day to the other merchants that Jean torn down. They should be desperate enough."

Petra cocked her head, a movement that was calculating and inviting enough that she drew the eyes of Armin and Connie, if only for a moment. You sent her a wry smile before addressing Connie. He wasn't happy with you - he met your eyes with a head-on sense of fighting a battle, refusing to blink. "You simply must get a large enough portion of the people interested in Jean's case. Don't make them sympathetic towards him - make them angry towards the government. Tell them that obviously, the government wouldn't have bothered arresting him unless he was telling the truth about the quality. Get them mad."

"Who?"

"Customers, market owners, guards... Anyone you can. You should have been acquainted well with the stalls not selling food by now, I imagine. Use your influence."

"Right."

Petra gently unwrapped her arm from around your waist and followed Connie out of the room, both of them not offering any further farewells. Sasha glanced after her best friend, a contemplative look appearing in the shape of her eyebrows and the flat line of her mouth. Armin managed to look bored. "Team Gluttony, then," you said. "First task is to actually first change that book for the one Armin wrote, with the right laws in. Then you're going to enforce them. Make sure people notice the change. They won't acknowledge it unless they want the people to see that they are indeed weak enough to be broken in and stolen from, but you're going to at least make people notice that they've been changed."

Armin didn't waste time. "How are we going to do that?"

"You're going to visit the court house," you said. "Overview how the courts run, how they judge people, if they follow your rules. If they don't, bring it up. Be obstinate... And see if you can visit Jean; tell him that it's alright."

"Is it really alright, though?" Sasha said, softly. You shot her a look, and in that moment, you knew that she was plotting something. And whatever it was, it was going to be dangerous.
"I swear," you said, your eyes drawing to the leather band that she had around her wrist, "that it will be alright."

Sasha's mouth tightened - it wasn't enough, but it would be for today, at least. She left, leaving you with Armin. He sighed as he watched you close your eyes and struggle to open them again. "You got four hours of sleep," he said, coolly. "I'd suggest getting more."

"That is indeed my plan," you said, sinking back down to sit on your bed. "But I'm half terrified that you're all going to break in and murder me for what I've done."

"They're just scared," Armin said, not entirely comforting. "I don't blame them, although I doubt you would let Jean take the fall for us here."

"Armin..." You said, blinking. The small boy had never showed any particular signs of caring for you - but he'd just offered you a flash of understanding and trust, the most precious thing that he had. The male didn't want to be thanked for letting that slip, however. He turned quietly and opened the door, his boots loud against your floors. "In case you ever wondered," you muttered, hearing his boots halt momentarily, "I made all of those bracelets early on, before you were at school. But I had the materials for all of you... I was going to have them ready for Christmas."

"You left Mikasa and I tracks towards Eren," Armin's voice said; your eyes were closing, and you were sinking back into your mattress. "That was the best present I'd ever had, and I doubt I'd ever be able to pay that favour back."

You opened your mouth to make some equally pretty statements, but the door snapped closed and clicked in such a way that you knew Armin had locked it for you, to stop anyone coming in. Then his footsteps sounded and you knew he was gone.

A few seconds later, you were too.

You climbed easily out of your window, getting rid of all traces of tiredness as you swung yourself easily onto the roof and flew down the rafters.

***

"We'll need the weapons for ourselves, but the rest you'll need to sell tonight," you told Gunther, swinging your legs from the rooftop. He sat in pensive silence next to you, the rest of Team Wrath away and stealing things. "No trace of anything left. Put whatever money you have left into my house's vault, if you wouldn't mind."

"Why didn't you come back here last night?" He said unexpectedly, his voice soft. You didn't want Team Lust to hear you and know that you weren't sleeping in your bed, as everyone was expecting you to. It was better, sometimes, to surprise people.

"Miss me, did you?"

Gunther shot you an amused look. "Levi got back and prowled and paced the house for hours because he thought you were coming. He - all of us - were hoping that you were going to come back. He's furious."

You shook your head, casting your eyes around the city. "Levi, furious? Are you sure we're talking about the same person?"

Gunther stifled a laugh. "He told us about how you'd rewritten the laws, how you'd practically turned the guards on full high alert to look out for anyone making trouble. I couldn't decide if he..."
was going to kill you, or..."

“Kiss me,” you finished, blowing out a breath.

Gunther echoed your sigh. “He doesn’t love Petra, you know.”

You flinched. “He’s engaged to her.”

“You’re engaged to a titan. Surely you know how arranged marriages work.”

You bit your lip. “It’s not really the point. Sure, the problem starts with him being engaged to Petra. But I could understand that – it’s an arranged marriage, like you said. I can understand that. But the problem gets bigger.” Gunther didn’t interrupt. “The biggest problem is that he didn’t fucking tell me about it. He was going to allow himself to be used to use me. That’s just messed up.”

“Welcome to war,” Gunther said. “It’s always going to be messy. You would never have liked something tidy, anyway.”

You tried not to look like that was exactly right. “How do you even know that?”

“You forget that I am in the same year as Farlan Church,” Gunther replied. “You had your chance at something tidy, Y/N. You had the chance to take Farlan as a tidy, unproblematic partner who would have genuinely adored you. And you did not take it.”

You looked out across the rooftops, remembering a world seen from a treehouse. A luxury of greens and jades and leaves. “I wanted to take it,” you confessed. “I knew that he would have been lovely. But I just couldn’t.”

“I’m not about to tell you who you should or shouldn’t love,” Gunther said, poking you softly in the side, as if he weren’t sure that you’d bite him for it or not. “But I’m just saying that he doesn’t love Petra.”

“Fascinating. Do you two make a habit of gossiping about loving Petra?”

You and Gunther looked up, startled at the voice. Levi was standing just a roof away, out of breath and carrying a bag that you didn’t want to even look at. Nevertheless, he managed to project a temper that accompanied his words. "I... I'll just... Bye." Gunther slipped off the roof and went inside, obviously trying to do his job and get away from the thought of his respected superior asking such a question.

"Don’t you even start being annoyed at me," you raised an eyebrow. "Because I’ll go toe to toe with you any day."

Now that Gunther had disappeared, Levi’s eyes were less shielded. Within their dark depths, you could see his temper being consciously checked as he started talking. “I didn’t expect you to talk about it with Gunther Schultz.”

“You’re right. I should really call Kenny and have this conversation.”

You regretted that jibe as Levi’s temper flared again. “I didn’t know he was going to take us,” Levi said, and he closed his eyes against the strain of glaring.

“Well, I suppose that it wasn’t exactly a normal happening,” you conceded.
Levi’s frown lightened by just a fraction. "What are we even fighting about? Right now?"

You waved a hand. “Not particularly sure. I have a list, but we’ll deal with that later, when we can actually see the sun again.”

Levi’s tone was flat. “You have a list of things that we have to fight about?”

You nodded. “I keep it in alphabetical order, too.”

Levi’s eyes sparked. “Good. Any other order would have been nonsensical. But would it have also been nonsensical to want you to check up with us last night?”

“I didn’t have to. I checked up with you this morning.” You weren’t going to apologize for not coming back - because an apology meant that you were acknowledging a problem and resolving to change it. You weren’t going to change that, the ability to come and go whenever you pleased. You would not be caged - you wouldn’t apologize for it.

“I know you don’t have to,” Levi said, shortly. “But it would have been nice to be aware if you were alright.”

“I don’t have to report to you,” you snapped.

“I don’t think you get it,” Levi snarled right back. “I am too used to not knowing if you are coming back – or if you’re even alive.”

Ah.

You didn’t exactly think of it in that way.

Levi perhaps sensed that you understood, for his anger seemingly deflated. “I want to ask you to not leave me. But I know – I know that’s ridiculous and unfair.”

You almost didn't hear him - his voice was so quiet against the thundering of your blood in your veins. But he looked at you with enough sadness in his eyes that you hesitated. There were important things to be done - by both him and you, separately. "One day, Ackerman," you said, softly enough that he knew what was coming, "I might make that promise to you and mean it."
**The Extermination**

“Are we ready to have ourselves a party?” You asked, opening the door to the boys’ bedroom and raising an eyebrow at the chaos inside. For some reason, everyone had chosen to inhabit this room instead of your room – or even the girls’.

“Are you entirely sure we’re leaving tonight?” Sasha said, pulling the strap of her bag higher on her shoulder as she kicked a pair of Connie’s shoes away from her.

“Entirely,” you said, baring your teeth at her. “Now, Petra, I think I asked you for something?”

Petra dug around in her neatly-packed bag and threw a few packs of dye in your general direction. You snagged them easily. “Dare I ask why you need hair dye?” Petra ventured, leaning towards you. You were nearly about to answer before Connie cut across you.

“She doesn’t like to answer things outright – don’t believe anything she says.”

Isabel snorted, eyeing Connie with a frank disgust that was amusing to see. Sasha merely nudged the boy with her foot, flicking her brown eyes deliberately to Marco – who was merely standing against the wall, as he had been for what you’d predict to be most of the night. Right – they had all come to the decision that this was Marco’s fight to pick with you. Not anyone else’s. “As charming as that notion is,” you replied, bagging the dye that Petra had brought, “I just need it for some children in addition to Mikasa and Christa. To keep them safe, and all.”

“You’re dying Christa’s hair?” Ymir repeated, her eyes flickering in warning.

“It’s only temporary,” you said, waving a hand. “It’s only meant to last long enough to get her out.”

“So she gets out, but not Jean,” Marco hoarsely muttered, before nodding to himself. Ymir shot him a look of pure dominance, signalling to find some other topic to grouch about. You straightened at the quiet doubt, more than ready to go up to the boy and fight about it. You were sick of being doubted and sick of being snapped at.

As you opened your cruel, smirking mouth to begin making Marco suffer, though, Petra caught your eye and raised an eyebrow.

That one movement stopped you dead in your tracks. It said that she understood, she really did, about what you were thinking. It was hard to have people hate you – she would know. But with the lift of one slender eyebrow, you heard the unspoken question of ‘do you really want to do this?’ as loudly and clearly as if she’d said it out loud. So instead of going to fight, you merely took a long breath and forced your posture to relax.

Your allies were few and fragile. Already, they were splintering from you – and that was the last thing you wanted to happen. So you would not prove them right in your hot-headedness. You would let them think whatever they’d like – but you would not prove their misguided thoughts correct.

Petra relaxed at the same time that you did, falling further into what must have been Armin’s pillows. You shot her an impudent glance that you knew would amuse her and began walking back to the door. Isabel shied away from Ymir to walk with you, her steps light and quick.

“How do you need dye? Really?”
You looked at Isabel with an exasperated sigh as she closed the door to the girls’ room behind her. “I literally just said – I need to get Mikasa and Christa disguised. We’re all leaving tonight.”

“All of us?”

“I’m going with you,” you nodded, making your way towards one of the children’s rooms. It took you three steps to realize that Isabel was not at your side any longer; you turned slightly, eyes finding her easily enough. She’d only stopped a few steps back.

It took you a beat longer to realize that when she’d asked if all of you were leaving, she wasn’t really asking about you. For a moment, you weren’t sure how to feel about that.

Then that moment ended, and you began to get angry.

“You’re more worried about Jean,” you stated. “I forgot you only liked me when you needed something.”

“Don’t be so shallow,” Isabel snapped right back. “You know how I feel about you because I’d wager that it’s the exact same way that you feel about me. But that means that you know well enough that I’m acting so stubborn because I cannot stand the fact that you might leave Jean here whilst we all leave tomorrow.”

“I said,” you repeated, beginning to walk back away, “that we are all leaving tomorrow.”

“Can we trust what you say?”

That pulled you up short. “I’ve only lied very few times – all of them to protect myself, none of them to hurt others.” You shot her a jaded glance, pleased to find that she was at least nodding at your words. She saw that you were still walking slowly away and nodded – to you or herself, you didn’t know. “Jean is mine just as much as he is yours,” you said. “And I’ve already said – we’re all leaving tomorrow.”

With that, both of you turned to go into separate rooms – Isabel to go back to the team awaiting her, and you to go and see which children were the fastest runners.

***

You threw a few more clothes into the bag, coughing at the scent of smoke wafting out of your window. All the pages of writing had been burnt – now only a pile of ashes in the fireplace, the only mark to all of your plots. You were throwing in the same things that you’d brought here in the first place. So many things you’d bought whilst you’d been down here – and none of it truly for you.

They’d do their jobs working for you, those items that you’d bought. In the long term, it would all be worth it.

You got dressed, as well. Gone were the ratty, wrecked clothes of black. Instead, you pulled on the brown leathers that were fine enough to hint at wealth, but practical. The only thing that you allowed yourself to take that was truly decadence was the ring – the seal ring that told everything who you were.

Ruler of the Underground.

Collecting titles was rather a nice hobby, you decided. Princess of Titans, Ruler of the Underground, Pride.
There was a light, hesitant knock on the door as you finally finished your packing, placed the last knife into a sheath inside your jacket and took a breath. You swaggered over to it, not quite ready to open it – because opening it meant that all of your plans would be put into place.

Olyver didn’t wait for you to open the door, though. He came through, his hair slightly greasy and skin waxy, as if he’d forgone a night of good sleep in favour of stressing throughout the dark hours. “Good morning,” you dryly greeted him, leaning back against your desk. Olyver took a few beats to scan you and the way that you were dressed, the bag that was on the desk behind you, the tidy and clean room.

“You’re really leaving, then?”

“That’s what I said I’d do,” you replied, trying to ignore the way that your throat tightened. The tawny-haired male swallowed and shut the door behind him. “Do you know what I’m going to ask you to do?”

“You’re going to ask me to stay here,” he said. You didn’t expect to feel the guilt that you did as he said those words. Leaving him here meant that he still would not see the sun or the sky; leaving him here meant that he was still trapped within the Underground, without passes or hope of freedom.

But leaving him here meant you had someone to oversee the changes that you’d made in just two weeks. It meant that you actually had someone here to trust with information coming in and going out, that you could rely on him making the right decisions when it came to the children and the house and the rules.

So you lifted your chin and looked Olyver straight in the eye, forbidding yourself from going back on this decision that needed to be made. “Yes. Will you stay here?”

Olyver let out a trembling breath and leaned against the doorway, brushing his arms with hands that might have been shaking slightly. “I have a choice?”

“We always have a choice – but there is a right one in this situation. And that’s to stay here and be my ears, my mouth, my mind. It’s to stay here and be mine when everyone will try and break what I’ve done here, when they’ll try to overthrow and twist what little good has been done.”

Olyver blinked.

“All of the people here – the Seven Deadly Sins. They’re all mine, whether they accept or know it or not. I claim them; they’re my friends, my team and would be my court if I were royalty to humans. You are a part of that – a part of Team Sloth. As such,” you continued, smiling gently at Olyver drawing himself up, “you answer to me, because you are mine. And whilst that means that you do have a choice, it also means that you have to think about other people other than just yourself. The Seven Deadly Sins do not operate as you’re used to in the Underground; we were unstoppable as a team because we functioned both as individuals with strengths, but because as a team we looked out for and cared for each other.”

“You and your pretty speeches,” Olyver snorted, but you caught the glimmer in his eyes. “You knew that this was going to happen the moment you broke me out of jail, didn’t you?”

“I knew it would probably lead to us having to part ways,” you said, turning and rummaging in your bag for a few moments. “But it’s better to have had and lost, rather than never had at all. Right?”
You chucked something at him, and he fumbled with the small thing before holding it up to the light and grinning widely at what he saw. “I’ll stay here.”

You bared your teeth at him and nudged him away from the door with an elbow. “You’re a bad thief, and a slightly better cleaner. But you’re mine, Olyver.” Your eyes flashed to your side for a moment, and your heart was lightened to see him fasten the leather bracelet around his wrist with a sense of pride. Two charms hung from the band – the smooth blue stone shaped as a ‘S’ as well as the silver star. “I thought the star really connoted the sparkling of those staircases after you cleaned them,” you supplied, grinning at his infuriated look.

“And the ‘S’?”

“To remind you of your good old team Sloth, of course. Now, I’ve made a deal with this guy called Kenny. He said he’d help run the place, so you won’t be alone. But send letters to me at this address and not through him – he could read them and alter anything.” You handed him some wedges of paper, with the address you planned on going back to.

You’d reached the staircase, and it was then that you fully turned to him and hugged him tightly. For a moment, he was tensed solid – but then he softened, as if realizing that this would be the final moment he’d be seeing you for a long, long while. “Goodbye, Ruler of the Underground.”

You sketched a bow as you disentangled yourself from his arms and took a few steps down the stairs. “Goodbye, Olyver of Team Sloth.”

***

“I hoped that you’d at least look super pale,” you said, your voice verging on annoyance as you looked inside the room. “But no, you still look gorgeous.”

Christa blushed and made shooing motions with her dye-stained hands, taking a lock of dark brown hair between her fingers and twisting it around, eyeing it bemusedly. “I’ve never actually dyed my hair before,” she said, scrunching her nose. “I don’t think brown’s quite my colour.”

“You think brown is bad?” Mikasa’s cool voice said, before she too came around the corner. “Try having this colour.”

You nearly choked as she came around the corner. The dark red of Mikasa’s dyed hair did not work in her favour, but it turned out that red was the only colour that would function with her pitch-black hair. But in that moment, when Mikasa Ackerman came around the corner, she wasn’t your classmate anymore. The hair was the exact shade of red that brought back a tidal wave of emotions and memories.

You missed her ebony hair.

But that was not the memory you wanted to have – ebony hair linked so closely to red meant someone else.

But Orion’s mother was no longer here – and she most definitely was not Mikasa Ackerman.

Christa stuttered a few times, trying to find the positives of having dark red tresses, but forwent any true attempt. “It’s only for today,” you tried, strolling up to her and ruffling her locks, “not for the rest of your life.”

The girl set those unforgiving eyes on you with a brief promise of death if you continued the touch. You quickly removed your hand, holding them up in what you hoped was a picture of innocence.
Mikasa’s sharp eyes went straight to your left hand, where you were clutching something. She met your eyes with slight surprise.

“I made these in one of the rare free afternoons I had,” you said, holding the leather bracelet from a finger. “It’s a different leather from everyone else’s, but it’s still… You know.”

Mikasa took the bracelet, and Christa’s eyes shone as she watched the impassive girl study the charm. “It’s a pomegranate?”

“I just tried to make a fruit,” you confessed. “I think it’s the thing that symbolises life and pleasure and the small things. I think you should grasp them for yourself, fight for it – you know?”

“And the red L?” Mikasa probed, fastening the bracelet around her slender wrist. Christa cocked her head, searching the charms and indeed finding the ruby ‘L’ hanging from a ring. You smiled at her and lightly chucked the other charm at her, watching as she fumbled with it before setting it on her own bracelet without a second of hesitation.

“To remind you of dear old Team Lust and the fact that you are part of something bigger.”

Christa sighed and smiled at the sight of her rose charm alongside the ‘L’. You almost didn’t want to begin talking, begin the process of ordering them around. But there were more important things to do today besides give out pretty charms. “So, now that you two have successfully got the guards running around after you, thinking that if they found you then they’d find the stolen passes, I have one last job for you to do.”

Christa raised a delicate eyebrow, concentration layering her looks. Mikasa merely smiled thinly, coming to stand behind her. You shot a quick look behind you, checking that Team Wrath weren’t near. It had only been seven in the evening as you’d arrived, smirking at them all desperately snatching at sleep, napping in the kitchen on blankets and pillows that they’d undoubtedly stolen from somewhere. The girls had been given the bedroom.

You’d sent Team Wrath to drop off the weapons with everyone, before heading towards the south part of the Underground, with strict instructions. They weren’t due back here – if all went to plan, they shouldn’t come back here at all – but you weren’t going to take any chances.

You smiled winningly at Mikasa. “Do you remember that empty wallet?”

Mikasa’s answering baring of her teeth was striking. “It wasn’t empty.”

“No, it was not,” you agreed. “And you’re about to find out what was in it.”

***

A few hours later, you knew that the time to start your operation had come.

You were still in Levi’s house, taking in the last moments of peace. Around you, silence was ruling your friends, who were all a mass of tension waiting to explode. So many things could go wrong – and if all of those around you thought that they’d break Jean free without it severely impacting their chances of survival, they were wrong.

All of you were crammed into Levi’s small three-roomed house, although Team Wrath and Lust were away. You stood up, ignoring the way that the house seemed so empty without all of the clutter of someone living there.

“Okay,” you said, the word holding all of the power as it broke through the dominating silence.
You held up a small bag first, taking all of the differently coloured stones in their varying shapes and passing them out to each person. The yellow ‘G’ for greed, the pink ones for gluttony. The green ‘E’ for envy and the blue ‘S’ for Ymir. “We’re going to go and cause some hell.”

“I hear it’s very nice this time of year,” Armin said, elbowing Sasha idly as they both fitted their new charms onto their bracelets. He fiddled with his other charm – an open book – before letting it swing freely.

Petra turned from where she was gazing out of the window, her own bracelet showing a sun. “Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. Where’s nice?”

Connie didn’t bother to play along with the playful mood. “Hell.”

“Ah.”

You coughed lightly, pointedly. Then you drew the swords that Gunther and Eld had given to you, motioning for people to draw their own as you opened the door and you all pooled into the street, the brown cloaks marking you all as people not to be tested. You locked the door behind you – not that it would stop anyone in the future from entering and doing what they wanted.

As you led the way through the street towards the south of the Underground, you murmured the information to the rest of your group. “I discovered that there’s a pit of titans that have infiltrated this area, and I know where it is. We’re going to go and slaughter them all.”

You didn’t blame Sasha for turning steadily pale. Petra didn’t flinch; she just gripped her swords tighter, her mouth straightening into a grimace. “How’d you find it?” Ymir asked, her voice carelessly blunt.

You didn’t want to think about the little tip that Kenny had given you. Instead of telling them all the truth, you hedged your next few words. “The guards know where it is – they’re just too scared to actually go and face them all. I found it out because I knew their patrols like the back of my hand, after all of the children had told me all of the routes. Did you know there’s an area that they specifically avoid? I went to go and snoop around and found it immediately.” You snorted, shaking your head at the ease of it all.

“I wondered what you were always doing when we were out,” Sasha grunted.

“What is Team Lust doing?” Ymir asked again, although she may as well have been asking straight about Christa.

“They’re going to be in two places at once, really. First and foremost, they’re the bait. We need the guards to help us slaughter them all,” you said, smirking at Isabel as she rolled her eyes. She didn’t like the idea that you needed help any more than you yourself did.

“But you’ve dyed their hair,” Marco said, his first words in a while. “How can they be bait?”

You whistled sharply, and two children raced from the archway that you were all steadily approaching. Ymir swore as she saw underneath their dark hoods and saw hair that had been dyed Christa’s shade of blond, and Mikasa’s shade of ink black. They ran past you, heading towards the guard’s quarters to raise the alarm.

“They’re two of the fastest children that we’ve had,” Ymir remarked – she’d know.

You hummed in agreement. “The guards’ tensions have been the highest these two weeks because everybody knows about the two beauties that had them falling over themselves and then stole
passes from them. I needed a reason to drag the main might of their numbers towards a certain area that they’d rather not go – and two beautiful women, who have stolen from them, who have humiliated them to the public? Perfect.”

“Why do they need to be there at all?”

You didn’t blame Isabel for the prideful question. “If we did it on our own,” you answered, taking a left pathway that was mercifully empty, “then the people would fall over themselves to respect us. They’d mock the guards and soldiers for being weak – maybe even rebelling, if we played it right.”

“What’s the problem with that?” Connie, this time, was the one at Isabel’s side and asking the sort of questions that you may have once done.

“We’re leaving,” you said, simply. “We won’t be around for them to worship and follow; the guards will. The guards will be following our rules and laws from now on – Armin and Sasha have made sure of that, by altering the laws over the past week and getting them official. So why would we get rid of the miniature army that – whether they are aware of it or not – are following us?”

“You’ve managed to scheme yourself into an army, the laws and an official title.” You winked at Petra as she summed it up. She slid her wide eyes to the boy at her side, but Marco did not seem to be in the right mood for admiring your plans.

“All of the money that Wrath and Greed have amassed through legal or illegal means is going into either maintaining my own house, the children, and the food market. The Underground will soon become safe, self-sustaining in food, and soaring in economy if it all plays out well. Gluttony made the laws for the city to follow, and we’re about to win the guards’ approval by securing them a victory against the titans, so they’ll be willing to enforce it. Lust became the bait and were the figureheads, and Envy secured our way out.”

You all walked in tense silence towards the south side of the Underground. It wasn’t until you halted in the middle of a narrow alley that the silence was broken. “Team Wrath, once I give the signal, are ready and in position to begin riling the titans up. They’re going to lead them down this very narrow alley – where an open mouth will be filled up by us.”

“I hate fighting titans,” Sasha groaned.

“Luckily,” you said, “they won’t be at their full strength.”

Armin sighed. “What do you mean by that?”

“It’s eight in the evening, and I can assure you that they’re all spectacularly drunk. That, and they’re fighting us. We are the Seven Deadly Sins,” you said, softly. “We are not afraid.”

You lifted the two swords that Team Wrath had stolen from the guard houses. They were heavier than your daggers or knives; the extra reach that they provided, however, were necessary in the close quarters of the alley.

Sounds of people running very, very fast approached you, and you gave one last cursory glance to the people around you. You held Sasha’s gaze. “You take three people and you hold that line. No matter what happens to anyone else, you hold that line. The titans must not be allowed to escape from this slaughter, otherwise this’ll just get worse. This ends with you.”

Sasha nodded, her mouth falling into a flat line. She jerked her head at Connie, who in turn motioned to Armin. You winked at the blond boy as he blew out a breath of air, walking to the
back of a very large group of people. He could strategize and bellow orders from the back, you realized. And Connie paired with Sasha – those two would not allow that line to break. Armin and Connie drew their swords, Sasha unwinding a cruel whip from her belt as if she, too, knew the power in her group alone.

Nothing prepared you for the soft exclamation of Petra as Eren dropped down from the roof. At the little shriek, you were already whirling, wondering how something could have crept up on you. Isabel had raised her rapier as well – not to strike the incomer down, as you had attempted to do – but to block your blow.

Eren blinked as he came to the realization that the only thing separating your swords and his chest was Isabel’s lightning reflexes, paired with rapier that she’d drawn in a heartbeat. “Come to think of it,” he said, his voice surprisingly steady, “I should have probably warned you all before I dropped in like that.”

“You think?” Ymir snapped, watching as Isabel lowered her blade and looked at him disbelievingly. “Anyone would have taken your head off.”

Eren shrugged, and you could practically hear Armin grinding his teeth in annoyance of his lack of caring. “Team Wrath is in their positions on the roof, ready to take on titans from that position. The guards are thirty seconds away from running into us, the majority of titans on their tail.”

“The children?” Ymir asked, to which you started for a moment.

“They’re safe and hiding, ready for their next part,” he answered, coming to stand beside Isabel and take up a battle stance. “The guards really thought they were the two girls they’d been searching for.”

“People see what they want to, sometimes,” Ymir remarked.

With that, you all clutched your weapons tighter as the squad of guards sprinted around the corner. Most of you parted, allowing them to run past – but Sasha and her team did not move from their positions, blocking the narrow alley. “There are titans coming,” one of them panted, pleading with the impassive Connie.

“And we’re going to deal with them,” you said.

“You can’t, girl, there are too many of the-“

You didn’t allow yourself to turn around, to watch the realization of who you were creeping upon the guards’ faces. Instead, you watched the titans round the corner, their own weapons flashing and cloaks flying behind them in a cloud of black. “Too many for you, perhaps,” Isabel replied, her rapier flashing in the meagre light as she angled it towards the left.

The titans weren’t going to stop, to take in the sight of new enemies.

So you started the run towards them as well, heading straight for the middle. Isabel took up position on the left, Eren and Marco on the right. At the last possible moment, you whipped your body to the right of the middle, dodging past their guard and swiping low, aiming to slice and tear rather than stab and seriously wound. Distantly, you could hear the sounds of swords clashing and people shrieking – but you couldn’t focus on that.

No.

You’d seen the red of the titan’s blood and suddenly, it was everywhere. You knew perfectly well
what this urge was, what was making you move your feet with such brutal simplicity. The slight throbbing in your head as you rolled on the dirty floor and slashed at tendons in the leg was not due to lack of sleep or dehydration.

The blood lust was awakening.

Everything was tinged in red. The titans kept pushing forward, and you realized what the tang in your nose was.

Alcohol.

The beasts were drunk off of their faces, and it made them so deliciously easy to kill. You didn’t bother glancing behind to see if anyone else picked up on it – picked up on the fact that Team Wrath had done their part in stealing the alcohol and Team Envy had done their bit in smuggling it right to the titans’ doorstep.

Normally, perhaps a shred of decency would make you pity the things that were probably seeing two of you instead of the one monster. But the urge to dance faster and swipe harder was pressing on your lungs and chest, tightening it so that you were forced to take gleeful, sharp breaths. There was an end to the onslaught of titans; you’d reached what had been the end of their wave, and now turned back to fight the ones that you’d injured and run around like they were little more than novices figuring out which end of the sword to hold.

Your friends were fighting like hellions, and now that the red tint to your vision was fading, you could appreciate and notice how far they’d come in a single year. Isabel’s rapier was little more than a blur; she was following the opposite of your style – stabbing briskly and surely into any place that she could. Rapiers were not built for slashing; only the fastest and slightest people could wield them with as much skill as Isabel was doing right now. The titans she dealt blows to didn’t die fast – they made it twenty more seconds, fighting other people that were ready to cover Isabel’s holes in her defences, not knowing that they’d been fatally hit until they likely fell to the floor and wondered where the pain was coming from.

Marco was more built for defence. He parried blades that the titans were throwing, forcing them off-balance so that Eren and Petra dove in for the kill without a second thought. Ymir’s style was blunter, more of a reluctant ‘get away from me’ swipe of her sword. She was driving the titans towards the others, you saw, dividing them into sections so that no single person was being overwhelmed or standing around doing nothing. As you watched, she even sent a few titans stumbling their way towards the guards, who clearly felt inspired enough to try their luck against titans who had clearly been drinking not ten minutes before.

The slashing in your hearing was not from blood lust, you quickly realized as you drove a sword through an unsuspecting titan’s throat. Sasha’s wrist would flick for a single moment, and then a titan would be down on the ground before an assailant, the kill easy. Connie was normally the one to venture a little further from the arch, swiping across the fallen titan with a mere disgruntled look that informed you of his awareness that the kill had been too easy to be normal.

Titans were killing machines, bred and educated for war. And yet here they were, dying as easily as flies, their bodies littering the already dirty alley floor. You had no qualms about killing the ones that had suddenly decided that they were indeed too immobilized to do anything but provide targets for the swords that came together.

Cloaked bodies were also dropping occasionally from the rooftops, the team that you couldn’t see but were still doing their job. You were sweating now, the effort of constantly ducking and dodging wearing on you.
And fighting back that blood lust.

You knew that if you let it take over, then Belua would take over too. And she would wreck whatever you’d built. The blood lust was a titan attribute, drilled into you from birth – if you accepted that titan within yourself, then it could overpower you.

As much as you’d finally accepted that your past did exist and that you were indeed who you were, you didn’t want to own it just yet.

You turned from the titan you’d just stabbed, watching as Marco downed the final one with a look of scared disgust. He gripped his arm in the way that told you he’d been hurt, and a brief pointed glance at Petra had her stepping lightly over to him to see his wound. The rest of your team stood still, chests rising and falling with the effort of pulling off that slaughter as they had. They allowed you to look them over, scanning for any and all injuries that had been bestowed. Eren was sporting a slice on his neck that likely wouldn’t scar if he looked after it properly, and Armin had a bruise dusting his cheekbones. Sasha was flexing her wrist, although you supposed that it was more due to strain than any hurt caused by a titan.

The guards didn’t speak until Team Wrath dropped from the roof, their swords splattered with blood. Levi’s lip curled as he dove into his pockets for a handkerchief, wiping the blades with a cloth that he dropped on top of the bodies once he was satisfied. His eyes found you, then slid around the group as yours had done.

“There are still some left in the actual pit,” Eld said, kicking a body to the side. “I’m assuming we’re going in for them as well?”

Ymir snorted as Connie stretched his arms above his head. “I’m ready for round two,” he groaned, rubbing his neck as though it were a mere chore.

“You – you’re all – going back and fighting more?”

You shot the guard who had spoken with a grim look. “Not exactly. The ones that are left are the drunknest. You are going to fight the ones left.”

“We were just trying to follow these two thieves,” another one piped up, eyeing a body of a titan that Ymir had likely led him to kill. “But we stumbled upon them – they were being angered by something, and it had caused them to crawl out of their usual hideout.”

Your lips set into a thin line of disapproval, ignoring the fact that the “something” they were being angered by was Team Wrath acting on your orders. “We’ve already practically destroyed the nest,” you said, stepping closer to the huddle of guards, lightly and pointedly stepping on the little floor that was not covered in blood or cloaked bodies. “You just need to call reinforcements and take care of the stragglers.”

“What?”

The word was echoed by the guards, whilst all of your friends merely roused themselves and got ready to set down the road that would lead them into more death. You shrugged. “Tell everyone that you destroyed the titans, or don’t. I don’t really care – all I care about is that you make sure every guard knows what we started here for you, what is owed to us. People will give you respect – respect that you’d been struggling to get for quite some time. So own it, take it – but never forget who gave it to you.”

The guards looked too stunned to nod, but you could pinpoint the exact moment when they came
to a unified agreement anyway by the way that their shoulders slumped and eyes lit up. Then Ymir’s eyes fastened on something behind them, and they turned.

You allowed yourself to widen your eyes in shock, as you saw a pretty blond-haired girl and a black-haired, slightly taller girl peek around the corner. The guards’ mouths gaped in shock and glanced at you.

For permission.

You waved a hand. “We’ll deal with the thieves for you. You guys call for your other soldiers to come and help you finish up here.”

The guards didn’t wait. A couple of them splintered off to indeed gather reinforcements, and the rest began heaving the bodies into the gutter. You and your team turned and started to run after the two girls, who both thankfully did not react to the subtle wink you gave them and flew away on wings of silence. You elbowed Isabel, who huffed in annoyance.

“We’re heading to the courthouse,” you panted in between breaths, knowing that the rustle of movement behind you was everyone joining your team. The two girls twisted themselves down an alley that you knew would eventually lead them back to your house, where Olyver was surely waiting for them with cups of soup. “Hang a left here.”

Isabel didn’t bother answering as you both cannoned down the left road, heading towards the main square.

By the time you all reached the courthouse, all of you were out of breath. Connie was hanging off of Sasha’s arm, looking like he would topple over any moment. But you were slightly impressed, despite yourself – a year ago, back in the start of Assassination Academy, none of them would have even managed half the distance you all just covered.

But there was no time to compliment them on it.

You and Levi met eyes as he opened the doors for you to all troop inside, the sizeable crowd inside instinctively parting for all of you, with your blood-splattered cloaks and weapons peeking out from their covers.

“Why are we in the courthouse at this time?”

“It’s time for Jean’s trial,” you answered.
You kicked out multiple viewers from the seats on the second floor, looking over the balcony. You’d thought that they may have attempted to fight you for them, but one glance at the pure temper and adrenaline simmering on the auras projected by your friends somehow convinced them otherwise.

“I don’t want to be here,” Marco whispered, and made to get up – but with a ruthless glance at Isabel, the red-haired girl snatched at his sleeve and jolted him to a halt.

“You can’t leave,” you said, sitting down and making sure that at least all of the judges had looked up at your crew at least once.

“Jean’s spotted you,” Isabel breathed in his ear, her green eyes glimmering. “You can’t abandon him here. Stay for his trial.”

You leaned irreverently over the railing, Connie biting his lip as Petra prompted him to sit next to you. “You’re a sadist,” Connie said. “Leaving Jean here to suffer as a criminal is one thing, Y/N, but making us watch as he gets sentenced to it? That’s cruel.”

Jean had indeed clocked all of you. He wasn’t looking spectacular – not that he ever truly did. His square jaw was dusted in bruises, and his lip had been cut by a shoddily thrown punch. But his eyes were dry as he raised them to roam the silhouettes of your crew, snagging on Marco’s as the dark-haired boy was dragged into a seat beside Isabel.

The disturbance caused by your arrival was quietened by the head judge, who looked like he was trying very hard to not be caught glancing up to you. A court visit by the Ruler herself – the pressure was on. And when things were put under pressure, you mused, they would buckle. Or they’d break the thing pressuring them.

That’s what you were all here to find out – which would break first. The judges and the law system, or the rules made by you and Team Gluttony.

“Back to the case at hand,” the judge said, his tone frosty, “do you deny falsifying records?”

“Yes,” Jean said, without preamble. He leaned forwards, and the dim light of the candles caught the sheen of sweat on his brow. “I didn’t falsify anything – the sources of food are appalling! The food isn’t safe!”

“But you are not who you claimed to be,” the judge interrupted, leaning back – the picture of satisfied elegance, if you could imagine him without the ugly chin. “Bring a copy of the book of laws, please.”

You raised an eyebrow as Jean shot a look up at you. His face fell.

The book was carried in by three guards in the old breed of armour – the iron clinking as they moved, bringing in a leather-bound book that looked far too old to exist. The judge and the book deserved each other, you thought. The crowd of viewing people leaned forwards, holding their breath as the judge flipped his way through the pages, his eyes winking behind his glasses. The mission you’d given Connie yesterday must have worked out, if there were this many people here. Indeed, the small group of elderly people that must have been regularly present in court sessions were looking rather confused at the sudden population of seats, clearly wondering why on earth a
mere boy of Y/A years old was so entirely dangerous.

“It says here that falsifying any records of any origin, be it name, merchandise or of economical nature, should indeed suffer the appropriate punishment listed under the section of imprisonment,” the judge read, his voice triumphant.

“Imprisonment?” Jean repeated, his voice pitiful in comparison.

“The duration of which shall be decided on the jury of people,” the judge continued, looking less pleased. The jury of people looked stunned – which wasn’t surprising. Court cases ordinarily did not rely on them – the punishment was usually decided on by the judge.

Connie let out a strangled breath as the jury fell into chatter, not even bothering to give Jean a second glance. To his credit, Jean didn’t look up at you again. He stayed glaring at the floor, his knuckles white from where they were clenched at his sides.

“They’re going to do it harshly,” Connie said. “They’re going to want to do it harshly. This is the first time they have power. Please tell me that you paid them off.”

“Judges would have been easier to bribe,” you murmured, softly. “An entire jury of people is chosen at random, and on the day of the court. It’s impossible to bribe all of them.”

The jury stood, signalling their decision. “For crimes befalling the people of this city,” they began, and you stopped listening. You schooled your features to become blank, irreverent. Anyone looking up at you and your crew would think that you truly didn’t care.

Good.

The court began whispered, and you realized that you hadn’t heard his final sentence.

“How long?” You breathed, to Connie.

“Twenty years,” Connie replied with equal softness – although it was more damning. “This is ridiculous, Y/N, we cannot leave him here for a minute longer, let alone twenty years.”

The judge was all too happy to bring down his hammer and have his guards lead Jean away, who had turned a rather ashen grey. Eren was the first to stand, twisting his body to you as he opened his mouth – about to yell. You shot a glare at Armin, who hurriedly shut him up.

“Let’s go,” you said, tersely. “All of you, right now, follow me.”

You stalked out, linking arms forcefully with Connie so that you were practically dragging him along with you – harshly, but you couldn’t afford to let him rip himself free and run himself into the jail that Jean was being taken to. Your crew were silent behind you – but they were all following.

Using all of the knowledge about shortcuts and the longer routes that Levi had taught you over the past few days, you led your team on the longest route back to the entrance of the Underground that you could manage, ensuring that you circled back many times throughout.

Levi didn’t question you – but you knew he wasn’t happy.

As you reached the main square, your friends had just about had enough. “What the hell was that?” Isabel snarled. “Was that part of your plan?”
“For Jean to get twenty years in jail?” You snapped back, twisting your hands. “No, Isabel, it wasn’t.”

“What the hell are you going to do about it?” Connie joined in, finally ripping himself free. “You got him in there in the first place – it’s your job to get him out.”

“I asked you all how you felt about being thrown in jail,” you said, allowing a trace of condescending attitude to imbed itself in your tone. “He was the only one who answered that he’d like to.”

“He was joking, you prat,” Sasha said, raising her hand.

You nodded, glancing deliberately to the right. Sasha didn’t follow your eyes, but Levi and Petra did – their eyes catching onto what you were looking at and understanding what you were doing. Relief flooded Petra’s face, and she started to smile before catching herself at the last second and following Levi’s impartial notation.

“I can’t believe he’s in jail,” Petra started to say, looping her arm through Gunther’s and tugging him to look at her – looking deliberately to your right so that he’d follow her gaze. “I didn’t expect anything to do with this.”

“We can’t do anything,” Levi agreed, crossing his arms and glaring down at the floor. “The brat’s in jail, I can’t be bothered to do anything about it either.”

Isabel caught on then – and Armin followed.

Slowly, they were realizing that guards were nearby – and a specific patrol following you, very close to your right, having followed you from the courthouse, and listening very closely to you all. When you all gathered by the entrance and assumed various woeful positions, they began to lose interest.

And then they were summoned by an emergency bell – stating that there was an urgent need for back up in the southern part of the Underground, and for every guard and soldier to bring their gear. You hadn’t anticipated that they’d summon every guard apart from the mere ones manning the entrance station, but they had.

“The soldiers underground are cowards,” you said. It was the worst insult you could give them.

“They’re really bad at maintaining security at the jail, too,” Mikasa said as she walked closer with two hooded figures in tow. You knew that she’d only taken off her own hood because of the lack of guards around, them having rushed to the site of the titans. “It’s mad.”

You smiled at the final piece of the puzzle as Jean and Christa lowered their hoods and smiled at you all. “Nice to see you,” you grinned fiercely at Jean, hoping the tears collecting in your eyes would not overflow. The brown-haired male grinned just as savagely back, and he raised his fist.

You met it with one of your own, the brief contact telling you that he, at least, had no doubt that you’d never leave without him. You turned to the rest of your party, not being able to resist your chin raising a few centimetres in an action of insufferable pride.

Marco took one step forward, as if in a trance. He then flung himself at Jean, who could barely prepare himself fast enough so that when Marco’s body hit his own, they did not tumble into the dirt. You only saw the pale, freckled face as it peaked over Jean’s shoulder, looking at you with shining eyes.

“You got him back,” he said, his voice steady despite the heaving of his chest.
You swallowed. “You thought that I would leave one of my own in the dark.”

Eren swaggered forward, hitting Jean on the shoulder and coming to stand beside you. “Nice job,” he muttered to you, his hand briefly touching your elbow before he squared up against Isabel, who had been eyeing the ground sheepishly.

“I know,” she said, rolling her eyes at the jade-eyed male. “I’m sorry for ever doubting you,” she said to you, her tone creeping into a more apologetic stance. “I’m sorry for thinking that you would leave him, but –“

“It’s tempting to leave Jean to rot in jail, I know,” you finished. You stuck your tongue out at said male before turning to Isabel. “But I would not leave someone in a dungeon willingly. I put hours into thinking things through, and you think I would do anything as stupid as putting my own friend into prison? As if.”

Your friends all had the good graces to look ashamed of themselves. Jean raised his eyebrow, his arms still around Marco. He met the eyes of Eren and smirked at him, who just inclined his head back. You took a breath, reaching into the satchel at your side and withdrawing the passes. You handed them out, each person gripping their respective passes tightly. They all knew just how much everything had been to get these.

“So how did they get Jean out?” Isabel asked as you passed hers to her.

“That man we stole the wallet from was a guy who dealt in freeing thugs from jail. He had an address of a house that had a tunnel in the basement leading right to it,” Mikasa supplied. “Whilst Christa and I were supposedly leading the guards around in a wild goose chase, we were at the house, preparing on collapsing the tunnel once we’d gotten Jean through.”

“You collapsed the tunnel?” Eld repeated, his hands shaking as he reached for a pass.

“I don’t want any more criminals getting out from now on,” you answered. “They sentenced Jean harshly in front of a crowd – that means they’ve accepted the new laws without questioning whether they’d been changed. Any time that my children need a distraction, they have the hair dye to distract the guards with the same beauties that we’ve used. And, of course, now that Jean’s escaped – they’ll be tightening security at the jail.”


“I thank you,” you said, inclining your head at her. “I needed Jean to be a scapegoat. They can’t even say that we broke him out, because several eye witnesses saw us nowhere near the courthouse after we left – we just walked to the entrance. There’s no way to connect any of this to us anymore.”

Isabel smiled, and bumped fists with you.

You led your mismatched team towards the doors of freedom, ready to see sunlight and this time, face it. You could not deny that when you’d arrived here three weeks ago, it was because you had been running away.

But you had many more things now.

Another title to be used. Your friends, their loyalty earned once again.

You were still going to run – but not away from anything. Instead, you were going to run towards
Y/N L/N had done all that she’d set out to do in the dark of the underground.

Exterminate all titans.

Establish a new, better society.

Become a figurehead.

All three completed and done within three weeks – one week for each task. But you’d done far more than what you’d originally planned. You’d been planning to use the children as you’d used your friends, ordering them into teams in order to get what they all desperately needed. But all things considered, you were infinitely glad that your friends were the ones that had appeared.

Because you’d earned their loyalty for the umpteenth time now, had won it through your own wits and persona and position. You’d won their friendship back. They were now unspeakably yours, just as you were theirs, through and through.

Petra brushed your arm as she strode past, shooting a wink at you as she linked arms with Eld and Gunther. She hadn’t let on that she’d missed them the week that you’d had her placed in a different team – but there she was, bathing in the necessity of touch with her comrades. You noticed how she made an effort to stay firmly away from Levi, walking next to Isabel.

Petra Ral. You smiled at her back, unable to stop the reaction. She was just another woman stuck in a world where she was going to fight tooth and nail to do some good. Who knew that you could have been so utterly, totally wrong about a single person? She was yours now, too. You knew without doubt that she was one of your most steadfast allies here – for who among you would have the strength to do as she’d done? Hatred was no easy burden to bear – especially not to a person who cared more deeply than she let on.

Your heart couldn’t help but sink at the sight of her bare ring finger, though. You remembered how bright her smile had been when she’d put it on, how clean and sparkling the ring itself had been – as if she kept it polished and well cared for, despite not wearing it. How radiant a bride she would be, with those eyes and the love that was in every expression.

Your thoughts stuttered.

You shook your head, putting aside those emotions. There would come a time where you’d allow yourself to feel things and sort through them. A world where the odds were still stacked against you was not soon going to give you that time.

But it didn’t matter, you realized.

Not as you spotted how Marco was still gripping Jean’s hand, tightly enough that you could see the tips of Jean’s fingers going pale. How you saw Connie shooting you idle smiles that were, you supposed, his carefree version of an apology. As you watched Eren wink and banter with Mikasa and Armin, the latter two looking more at ease than you’d seen in a while.

As long as there were little moments like these, the future of worry and stress did not seem as daunting as it would have done.

Your party reached the guard house, and silence fell. You stepped forwards, presenting your pass to one of the twenty guards waiting nearby, and smiled charmingly. “I think it’s time for us to see the sun again,” you said, shrugging in an unspoken gesture of violence, making sure that your
knives clinked at their belt. Behind you, you could almost feel your group drawing themselves up and smiling like hellions.

Naturally, with all of them being utter messes and their weapons recently bloodied, it did not take long for the guard to look through all the passes and jerk his head towards the door. A favour, you realized. He was doing all of you a favour and not looking too closely, lest he drew attention to the shoddily dyed hair of Mikasa and Christa. A favour for the help you’d given his comrades, maybe even a few of his friends, as you’d help them fight their way out of the festering pit of titans hidden in plain sight.

The guard didn’t know that it was your crew that had led them all there, but none of you were feeling inclined enough to reveal that to any of the guards on duty. Instead, you all trooped towards the stairs.

You allowed everyone else to go first.

Isabel and Levi took the lead, not even sparing a farewell glance to the city that they’d both braved facing again for your sake. The odd friendship between Petra, Connie and Armin followed next, as well as the wary eyes of Eld and Gunther. You tried not to smirk at the rolling of eyes, the easy flowing speech that was between them all. Odd ties, but still connections.

The rest filed through pretty much as a bulk. Christa couldn’t seem to wait to get back to the light, her now-brown hair drawn back from her face. Eren and Jean were laughing now, talking about the lack of carpets – for whatever reason – and Ymir closed the group, giving you a frank assessing look before striding to catch up with Christa.

You wished you knew what was behind that look. You’d seen the odd companionship the girl had struck with Olyver, the freedom she’d felt in working alongside him. Perhaps she disliked the fact that whilst you were all prepared to walk back into the sunshine of the world above, he was staying below.

There was no guilt, which surprised you more. You’d tried to work around it all – leaving Olyver in the darkness. But the fact remained – the fact that the children needed someone to lead them into a brighter future, the fact that as Ruler, you needed someone down here to help you pass information to and from the Underground.

Olyver had been that someone, from the moment you’d broken him out of jail and claimed that life debt he owed you.

He was a shit thief, a slightly better cleaner – but now you were evaluating his worth as a friend.

With that, you almost didn’t allow yourself to look around the city. But your eyes were darting around before you could shut the door to the pit that you’d done your best to make better.

You only saw the flash of a dark cloak at the end of the street, but that had been the only movement. The wearer had wanted you to see him, mark him. Everyone else was either yelling at the courthouse or trying to find the two girls in the south.

You didn’t give Kenny Ackerman the pleasure of knowing that he’d unsettled you, that he’d guessed enough of your plan to know that you and your team would be exiting the Underground at this exact moment. So instead, you flipped a vulgar gesture in the direction that he’d gone, making a few of the puzzled guards choke, and firmly shut the door behind you. The laughter of your friends above spurred you on, a few of them looking back with pleased grins to see where you’d gone.
You smiled back at them, the faces of those people who you’d claimed.

Y/N L/N arose from the unending dark, ready to do what more needed to be done.
“Sun,” you said, smiling. “How I’ve missed it.”

Not that there was much of it – the day had known that you would surface from the depths and had prepared itself appropriately. It was a grey day – not quite the dark grey that warned of a storm, but the light grey that teased a light behind it.

“This reminds me,” Levi said, suddenly, turning to grab your shoulder tightly. “Where the fuck did you take my horse?”

You choked before laughing. “I let him go outside of the walls – I would have thought he’d made it home by now.”

“You – you what?” Isabel and Jean both said, one of which eyeing Levi anxiously and the other smacking his hand dramatically into his face.

“Horses don’t know where home is,” Levi said, his voice so tightly controlled that it sounded flat. “Are you telling me that Raven is gone?”

You wanted to slyly place Isabel between you, but the girl had already begun following Ymir and Christa to where they’d had the horses stabled. “I am perhaps telling you that Raven is gone.”

“I’m going to kill you slowly,” Levi said, and Petra raised an eyebrow before patting his elbow. “Don’t you try calming me down. I am calm.”

“I don’t think you quite know what quantifies as calm –“ Petra started to say, but one glare from Levi was enough to make her see how far gone he was. She sent you a mock salute, nervously skipping a couple of steps ahead just so that she wasn’t in the danger zone.

“She’s right, you know,” you said. “Calm and you seem like unlikely friends.”

“We’ll be better friends when you’re dead,” Levi said.

You left him sulking and brewing that magnificent temper, hurrying to join Petra and talk about her experience with the dye store. The streets seemed tame – far tamer than the ones below the depths of them, in that world where any one person hadn’t seen sunlight. Even the thieves here were wise enough to not even look in your direction too long. The ones below would have been wise enough to do the same – but desperate enough to try robbing all of you anyway.

Ymir and Christa led the way through the main street, heading towards the very castle where you’d once spent a school trip. You and Isabel bumped fists as you both took into the view of the banners and the walls – and you flushed as you remembered how your first experience with 3DMG had taken you soaring through the air just a few hundred meters away.

You couldn’t remember if the thundering in your blood had been because of the height and the rush – or the male that you’d had to cling to.

The castle’s stable swam into sight, and a slight sense of trepidation began to settle itself in your stomach. “You stored horses in here?” You asked, muttering to Ymir.

Ymir replied as Christa stepped forwards to deal with the stable attendant. “We didn’t exactly have enough time to think of a discrete solution. Don’t blame us for making the tough call.”
“If all goes well, I won’t have to blame anyone,” you conceded, and walked straight into Erwin Smith’s chest.

You didn’t have time to fall to the ground before the large man had his arms around you, his hands gripping your elbows. You’d forgotten just how huge the man was – his mere hands could break your elbow joint, if he so desired.

“Imagine what a day I’m having,” Erwin said, looking down at you with his eyes glowing with murder.

“I bet you that I’m having a worse one,” you replied, and tried to shift your feet to get a good stance – if you could twist just a little, you’d be in the prime position to knee an area you were certain Erwin wouldn’t be spectacularly pleased about. “But, for the record, I’m blaming Ymir and Christa for this one.”

“Consider it recorded,” Erwin said, and you froze as you looked around and saw that the Survey Corps were surrounding your crew. Jean and Eren were already back to back, and Ymir was dragging Christa back to be behind her. Levi didn’t bother to move – he just crossed his arms and glared, dark eyes glittering as his personal squad held up their hands. “Ah, Levi Ackerman. Your horse was found grazing around the school – he’s at the stables there.”

“I did tell the horse to go home,” you said, directing your tone at Levi although you didn’t take your eyes of Erwin. “You can’t blame me for Raven being irresponsible.”

“But I think I can blame you, Y/N L/N, for not being in the dungeons of Assassination Academy,” Erwin said, his body so annoyingly huge and close that you couldn’t move yourself how you wanted to. There would not be any winning against Erwin in combat today – and the very thought annoyed you. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” you said, smiling at him charmingly. “Why is the head of Survey Corps in the base for the Military Police?”

“For some reason, my second in command went missing,” Erwin said. “I came to see if the sudden intake of horses bearing the Survey Corps mark had anything to do with it.” You marvelled – his voice was so rigidly controlled. But the fact that he was putting in such effort in order to control his voice was a giveaway – the man was panicked.

Erwin Smith had heard that his precious second had disappeared, along with the SO squad, as well as the titan princess and several of the best students in second year.

You supposed that he had had quite an interesting few days.

“I was perfectly fine,” Levi said, and both you and Erwin broke off your silent staring match to look at him. “Calm, too.”

“You disappeared for a week and a half,” Erwin said, suddenly sounding annoyingly chipper. “No report, no verbal communications from anyone. The Academy is in turmoil with their students going missing, the damned titan unaccounted for.”

“My humanity is still being questioned?” You asked, before rolling your eyes. “How dull. I would have thought everyone would have moved on in three weeks.”

“And why are you surrounding us like criminals?” Jean asked, his voice as equally flat as Erwin’s had been a few moments ago.
“Are you not criminals?” Erwin asked, moving his grip so that you were twisted into his chest in an odd sort of restraint – your back pressed to his chest, his hands still steering your elbows with annoying ease. You caught the looks of your friends as the true difference in your height and Erwin’s was thrown into light. You were a force of nature, certainly – but clapsed to Erwin’s chest, the top of your head unable to reach his chin, you were willing to bet that you looked like a mere ragdoll. And you didn’t doubt that Erwin had planned it that way – to make a message for your friends.

Jean opened his mouth, and you cursed. “I did get thrown into jail, technically.”

Mikasa stood on his foot. “That was part of a roleplay between him and Eren. Nothing to do with the law.”

Eren gaped, and even Marco flushed bright pink. Jean, too busy swearing about the pain in his foot, said nothing more than a few swear words that would have curdled milk had there been any in the immediate vicinity.

Erwin laughed, which was almost traumatic for you, being clapsed against his chest. You hadn’t realized just how the man laughed with his entire body – but now that it was reverberating through your own back, you doubted that you could forget it.

You wondered how long had been since the last time that Erwin Smith laughed.

“Haven’t you made your point?” Levi said, and Erwin’s arm tensed. “Let her go.”

“Do you possess proof that she isn’t dangerous?” Erwin asked.

Levi’s gaze turned murderous. “We’re all alive after spending the past week and a half in her company. She didn’t eat any human meat, instead eating the same food as we did.”

“Miss L/N,” Erwin said, and you could only imagine the smug tilt of his eyebrows as he said it. “Is it true that titans are able to eat non-human food?”

You clenched your jaw before answering. “Yes. I assure you, however, I would have complained about it greatly if I were a titan. I’m not used to being discrete.”

“Liar,” Erwin said.

You didn’t like that. “You don’t get to keep using that word against me.”

“You were a liar then, and you still are one now,” Erwin said, and you felt him as he shrugged.

“So was Levi, and yet you trust him now,” you said. “Levi was sent to kill you, and you knew it. And yet you trust him now, with your life.” Levi raised an eyebrow, and the movement was so beautiful in its destructive nature that you wished to replay the moment. But unfortunately, Levi was far too busy becoming steadily enraged at you to bother about satisfying your appreciation.

Erwin hummed. “How about we take this inside?”

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You snorted in disdain as a couple of guards secured the chains at your ankles, fixing you to the chair. “Do the chains excite you, Sir?”

Erwin’s face didn’t change from the plain indifference. “You certainly don’t look like a titan.”
You rolled your eyes. Your friends had been carted into the castle and separated into the many, many interrogation rooms – although you doubted that they were getting the same situation regarding the chains. You supposed you ought to be flattered – but you weren’t. Instead, you were incensed. “And you don’t look the sort of guy to enjoy chains, and yet here we are.”

It wasn’t your normal style of annoying people in charge, but when you were irritated, even the flirty kind was going to have to suffice.

“We do have a way to find out, but you’re not going to like it,” Erwin said.

You blinked in shock.

“About your status as a titan,” Levi said from behind you, stalking inside the room and coming to stand irritatingly close to Erwin’s side. “Not about – the other thing.”

Erwin didn’t bother to confirm or deny it – his eyes just shining with that irrefutable intelligence. You remembered how you had claimed to Kenny that you’d follow this man anywhere – but had that been true? In that moment, you’d been wanting to almost convince Kenny that Levi’s choices had been correct, had been the right ones.

You weren’t ready to wonder why just yet.

“Hello, my darling Y/N,” a breezy voice said over your shoulder, and you couldn’t help the immediate reaction to clench your shoulders to your neck.

“You would never be so torturous to leave me in the hands of Hanji Zoe,” you ground out, sending Erwin the deadliest glare that you could manage.

Erwin spread his arms in the picture of grace. “Not unsupervised, of course.”

“Don’t be like that, Y/N – can I still call you Y/N?” Hanji said, coming around your chair to kneel by your feet and look up at you with eyes that were practically glowing.

“Does it really matter if I say no?” You said and fought off a small smile.

“Not particularly,” Hanji said. “Although I did hear something about chains earlier – do you want to set up a safe word?”

“Stop,” Levi snapped.

“Bah,” Hanji said, and waved her hand at him before she started poking at you – poking at your neck (where the damning scars were), at your teeth (unfiled and unsharpened, unlike the titan tradition), at the tattoo.

“Why doesn’t Levi get to be chained down and interrogated?” You asked, once Hanji’s fingers were out of your mouth.

“Too exciting,” Hanji said, throwing a wink over her shoulder at where Erwin was shaking his head.

“As you said, I trust him,” Erwin said, ignoring the way that Levi bit his lip – not in embarrassment, but in pure wrath. You were suddenly glad, obscurely, that you’d gotten his team right. “I don’t often chain up the people I trust. And if you make that another innuendo, I will ensure that you never see sunlight again.”
“I wouldn’t be making such threats against me,” you said, wincing as Hanji sliced the tiniest cut on the back of your calf and collected the droplets of blood that welled there. “I don’t doubt that you know who I am.”

“Ruler of the Underground,” Erwin said, inclining his head. “I am aware. Very impressive.”

“I am, aren’t I?” You said, nodding to yourself. “And yet I still get chained up.”

“You didn’t fight it very hard,” Hanji said, holding the tube that held your blood up to the light.

“We’re not on opposite sides in this war,” you told Erwin, who nodded. “You’ve fought for me, and I’ve fought for you. I saved you, and you saved me. That seems like allies to me – so why am I still in chains?”

“I don’t trust you,” Erwin said, quite simply. “I have absolutely no idea how far you’ll go in this war against the titans, or what risks you’ll take, or what you’ll pay to win.”

“Sometimes,” you replied, “neither am I.” Levi jerked his head at Hanji, and she skipped from the room – probably going to compare your blood samples to some other titan’s that she’d managed to collect over her life. “Sometimes, I wake up and I think that I’ll never sacrifice anything again. I’ll believe it.”

Erwin cocked his head. “And other times?”

“Other times, I think that everything I am is worth nothing anyway – so why not pay it?”

Levi turned his back to you so that you couldn’t see his face, but you could glean enough from the straight slope of his shoulders that he was still simmering in his own anger. Erwin didn’t react – just met your gaze with a hardened one of his own, soldier to soldier.

“I’m about to interrogate your friends about all of your activities in the past few weeks,” Erwin said. “If they’re good children, I’ll consider letting them all go back to school. If they’re bad, the Academy won’t want them – they’ll go to the Survey Corps without finishing the required qualifications.”

You started. “You can’t do that.”

“I can,” Erwin said. “And I will. It’s either let them become homeless or allow them into the army that they were training for, where they’ll get a pay and a room. I thought I was being merciful.”

You swallowed. “If it comes to that,” you said, and allowed your voice to drop the room’s temperature by several degrees, “they are mine. I am Ruler, after all. And I will challenge you for them, and I’ll win them.”

“If it comes to that,” Erwin echoed, and stood. “Levi, unchain her.”

Erwin shut the door behind him.

In the silence that followed, Levi didn’t move.

“You’re angry,” you said.

“You’re correct,” he replied, still speaking to the wall that he was facing.

“I’m also angry,” you said.
“Is that so?”

“Immeasurably.”

Levi turned his head just enough that you could see the wicked gleam of his onyx eyes in the shadows – the murderous intent that you’d seen in Erwin. Erwin was always controlled – a tight wire, coiled to perfection, his mask never slipping no matter who was looking at it. Levi was just as controlled – most of the time.

But here, in this room where you were chained to a chair and the door firmly shut behind you, he allowed it to slip.

“How are you still wearing that ring?”

You blinked.

It seemed that here was where Levi wanted to erupt, wanted to fight, wanted to yell.

Wanted to start the apocalypse.

You took a breath and allowed your repressed anger to rise, feeling the wrath coming to boil your blood. You’d shoved it far deeper than anything the past few weeks – and unleashing that damper, allowing the pure emotion of rage to come tearing to the surface, was glorious.

“I’m wearing this ring so that it reminds all of you how you failed me,” you said.

Pure poison.

“You’re wearing it to remind yourself that you’re not mine,” Levi said, still looking at you from over his shoulder.

“You’re engaged! To Petra!”

“It was an arranged engagement!”

“But you didn’t tell me about it!”

“What could I have said? Told you that the girl you already despised was my future wife? You would have gone on a murder spree!”

“And what if I would have? You would have deserved it.”

“I couldn’t compromise our position for the sake of the bloody mission, Y/N. I couldn’t tell anyone anything – or I would have been placed somewhere else, where I couldn’t protect Farlan and Isabel.”

“Farlan and Isabel have never had anything to fear from me,” you spat.

Levi suddenly twisted around them, sitting himself on top of the desk. “How could I have known that?”

“Because any fool could have looked at me and known that I loved those people, damn it! But what do you really know of love? You manipulated me for the mission.”

Levi snarled. “Don’t you use that reasoning. You manipulated every single person around you to remain hidden.”
“Did you even love me? At any point? Or was it all for the sake of the mission?”

Levi threw himself to his feet and sprinted at the wall, where he punched the stone with sickening force. You heard the wet crunch of his knuckles and knew that he’d broken more than one of them. You didn’t wince as he then turned and walked straight up to you, leaving bloody imprints of his hand on the wall.

He grabbed the shirt of your collar and tugged your face closer to his. “Don’t you fucking dare. I was given a mission and carried it out. From the moment you told Erwin that information when he held a knife to my throat, my mission ended. Is that so hard for your shitty brain to understand? I didn’t even tell you that I thought I loved you until long after my entire job was done.”

“But even then,” you hissed into his face, “you were engaged to another girl.”

“You’ve been engaged to another male for years longer than I have!” Levi roared back, letting go of your collar as he took himself a step back. “You didn’t care to tell me about that!”

“I was never intending on going back there, you prick. I left him behind!”

“And from the moment I knew I loved you, I intended on doing the same to Petra, you fool.”

Your fury took a stumble. “You – you what?”

Levi laughed hollowly. “You think I’d stay engaged to another woman when I so obviously fell for another?”

“You are still engaged to another woman.”

“For the months that you were in the titan’s grasp,” Levi said, now looking distantly out of the barred window, “I went back to the school with Isabel and Farlan to make sure that they were safe. And then I went into the dungeon and slaughtered all of the titans that were there.”

Your breath caught in your chest.

“And then once I was done slaughtering all of the titans in captivity,” Levi said, “I then travelled into the country to try and find their bases. I killed all of the titans that I found – but they’d gone rogue. I couldn’t find the base where you were at – and a few months passed before I realized how much time had passed, and how I was being useless, just killing the things that took you from me and not actually finding you. I realized that I had to trust Mikasa and Armin, who still hadn’t returned to the school which I dropped into on my way back to Erwin.”

“You tried to find me,” you said.

Levi’s lip curled. “You spent months with titans, and so did I. Except I killed the things, and you were figuring out how to survive long enough to kill them all later. But I think you’ll find that opportunities for cancelling engagements in the wilderness are fucking limited. It’s how I knew that the east wouldn’t have you, and why I headed south instead, to this city.”

You closed your eyes.

All of that anger was out of your system – and he’d taken it.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Orion,” you said.

“I’m sorry for not telling you about Petra,” Levi replied.
You considered your next words for a moment. “I’m also sorry about Raven – but at least we know he’s safe.”

“I think I’ll find it within myself to forgive that, somehow,” Levi said, and turned to kneel at your feet. His hand was indeed mangled and useless, blood dripping from the bruises that were bursting from his knuckles. You bent over to help him free your ankles from the chains, as only one of his hands was working. As they came lose, Levi made to stand, but your hands were at his shoulder.

He stayed knelt before you.

“We’re going to sort this out,” you whispered, pressing your forehead to his as your hands rose to curl at the bottom of his jaw. “Right?”

“Of course,” Levi said, frowning. “What are you, stupid?”

“You wish,” you said, and kissed him.

You had no time to debate whether it was a good or even a healthy decision. All you knew was that when you looked at him, you wanted it. You wanted everything to do with Levi Ackerman – from the poisoned words he spat at people to the way he stayed utterly still in the kiss that you sprung on him.

His lips didn’t move but you felt his eyelashes flutter against yours as he reeled in shock, silently. For all of his planning and plotting, he was easy to surprise.

You decided to be merciful and pull yourself away from him. “I have no idea who I am – if I’m still the girl that you loved first, or if I’m something else entirely.”

Levi heard the unspoken question – you saw that from the way that his eyes hardened and became darker. “I’ll choose you. As you were, as you are, as everything you ever will be.”

You smiled – or maybe you had been smiling from the moment you’d kissed him and hadn’t realized. “Next time you have to use me for a scheme, you tell me.”

He inclined his head and stood, clutching his broken hand to his chest. “I’ll do my best. Next time you plan on being alone and want to fight, give me ample warning to spiral into my anger safely. Then I won’t break my hand like a complete twit.”

“I’m sure I could figure something out,” you said.

“I have no doubt that you could,” Levi replied, and gestured for you to stand and follow him. He opened the door that Erwin had shut, striding out with purpose. “Where did that infernal woman go?”

“Hanji went down to her lab, sir,” one of the guards said, not bothering to hide the fact that he was eyeing you uneasily. “Something about cross examining the blood types.”

“Fun times,” you said. The guard did not look amused.

“You can wait for your friends in one of the staff rooms,” Levi said. “I’ll go get my hand wrapped by that psycho.” You tried not to look like you were going to saunter straight into the other rooms and feed all of your friends the same details, enabling them all to go back to the school of safety. Levi did not look amused. “Straight into the staff rooms. If you disobey Erwin now, he’ll be less likely to help you later.”
That was true – annoying, but indeed true.

Instead of sauntering into the many other rooms along the corridor, you stalked after a guard that Levi hissed some instructions to, wincing as he glared down at his hand – blood starting to seep from the knuckles. “Is he aware he could have not broken his hand?” The guard asked, opening one of the heavy double doors leading to a lounge.

You shrugged and hastily stifled a grin. “It wouldn’t have been as dramatic if he hadn’t.”

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One by one, your friends joined you in the lounge until the last few people had walked in as a group.

Marco, Jean and Eren had gravitated towards a table where they were energetically waving around long sticks. Armin had promptly gone straight towards the scantily stored bookshelf, where Connie and Sasha had set themselves up.

Petra, Eld and Gunther had gone to the window, tightly crossing their arms as they surveyed the grounds below and began muttering to each other. You wondered who would win their allegiance in the end. Certainly, you’d earned it – but if there were ever circumstances where they had to choose between Erwin, Levi and you… You had no idea where they’d fit.

You were sat on the sofa next to Christa, who still looked shocked every time she looked into the mirror to see a brunette instead of a blond. Ymir, too – her eyes widened every time she looked at the girl who held her heart.

“What did you even tell them that we did down there?” You asked Christa, suspiciously. Christa frowned.

“I just said that we went down there to get you back, and that you kept all of us in the dark on your plans until we broke out.”

You considered that, but Jean swore. “Were we meant to go for the “we didn’t know anything” route? If so, I messed up. I tried to sell the elaborate tale of how we set up an ice cream empire.”

Marco caught the look of brewing murder on your face and interrupted. “Did they buy it?”

Jean snorted. “Only after I started lecturing him on the different flavours. I think I made him hungry.”

“I sold the much more convincing story of how we started a knitting group,” Connie volunteered.

You began to scream internally, both at your friends’ stupidity and the fact Levi had managed to convince you not to feed them all the same story before Erwin got the chance to interrogate them all. Sasha, meanwhile, scoffed. “Were we not meant to tell the truth? I just said that I ate a lot of beef stew.”

“That was one of the only truthful things that was said in the entirety of that process,” Erwin interrupted, striding in and sitting opposite you. “From Sasha Braus, no less.” You couldn’t help your eyes skittering across to look at Petra again. Erwin sighed. “I didn’t end up interrogating them, in the end. They’re Levi’s responsibility and they followed him. I can’t fault them for it.”

You stayed silent, watching as Erwin leaned back into the sofa and broadly crossed his legs. He was huge – how you’d all been fooled into thinking of him as a student was beyond you. There was
not a single person your age that could master looking like Erwin Smith.

“You know that we could have very well done all that these idiots said that we did,” you said, after Erwin had settled his stare on you and the silence had become oppressive.

“I do,” he agreed. “But I doubt that the Ruler of the Underground bothered to establish a knitting society.”

You shrugged, even as you sent a poisoned glare at Eren. “I could have desperately wanted a hobby.”

“Perhaps you could have,” Erwin said. “Now, there’s the matter of my verdict.”

Jean and Eren straightened and walked around to stand just to the left of your seat, arms crossed and wearing matching frowns. You rolled your eyes. “Dramatic, today, aren’t we?”

“Presentation is always important,” Erwin replied.

“I’ll tell you what your verdict is,” you said. “You’re going to let all of the students go back to Assassination Academy, allow the SO squad to do as their leader commands, and let me do as I want.”

Erwin’s eyes didn’t change, but his lips tugged into something that could have been a smile if it didn’t radiate the aura of superiority. “And what is it you want?”

“Freedom,” you said. “Freedom to do as I want – to manage my role as Ruler, to finish my education, to go hunting for titans. Whatever I wish, whenever I wish.”

Jean and Eren kept their faces blank – but you didn’t miss the slow panic rising to Christa’s face, or the way she kept darting looks at Ymir. Erwin, however, looked rather pleased. “Will you use your freedom to work alongside the scouts? Namely, myself?”

You held his gaze. “I’m sure I could free up my schedule to give you imbeciles a helping hand.”

“We’re going to change the world,” Erwin said, and stood. You mirrored him, grinning as he held out his hand. You shook it once – and as you glanced at the door behind Erwin, where Levi had only just entered with bandages strapped to his hand and an apprehensive look on his face, you had to wonder.

Wonder if the apocalypse that was you and Levi wouldn’t just change the world, but destroy it.

You wouldn’t allow it to happen – but change was coming. It had been beckoned into being the moment that Levi had broken his hand, and had been coaxed into following as you’d clasped Erwin’s hand in a handshake.

And that, you would allow.
“What are you going to do?” Isabel asked, patting Strawberry’s side anxiously. “Come back home with us.”

You glanced around. People were on top of their horses, jubilant that they were being let go, chatting to each other. “There’s a council meeting here in a week, Isabel – I’ve got to be there for it.”

“Then be there for it,” Isabel said, with such an easy shrug that you were slightly jealous of. “Come back here in a week. Besides, today is Friday. We have to be back at school for the game – imagine Pixis’s face when you guess it.”

You bit your lip, annoyed that Isabel knew very well how to convince you to go anywhere. “You realize,” you said, slowly, “that if we partake in the game, I’ll be going solo?”

Isabel looked faintly startled as she began waving her fists around. “No! That’s not fair! I wanted you on my team!”

“Looks like Team Envy was the first one to crumble,” Jean told Eren, who snorted in response. “Marco owes me his desert for three days.”

“We won’t crumble if I can help it,” Marco said grimly, eyeing Isabel as she performed a tantrum that was drawing the eyes of many curious onlookers. “Come on, Isabel – we at least have to beat Team Greed. I bet my deserts on this!”

Isabel sobered up, ignoring the way that her stropping had caused her hair to frizz around her face. “True. Greed has Jean. We’ve got to beat him, at least.”

You made an affirmative noise, trying not to look like you were seriously contemplating it. Chatter was everywhere – and you’d missed it. Idle touch, too, was being displayed without a second thought. Christa was patting Sasha’s shoulder and Isabel was now hitting Jean’s knee. This was the essence of what made humanity so effortlessly beautiful.

Affection was as necessary as breathing in order to nurture the mind.

The titans had forcibly removed that aspect, forcing the mind into violent fits. The operation that crippled it, that forced insanity to take over – that’s all it took to change from the happy scene around you to the hell that was the titan society.

Happiness was the way that Oluo and Petra were sitting a little ways off, just around the corner from the stable where all of you were, excitedly chatting about what they’d missed in their respective worlds. Oluo, apparently, had come along with Erwin with anxious hopes to find his team that had mysteriously disappeared.

You gasped as Levi led Skira into view, his head bowed as he exchanged words with Gunther. Isabel laughed as you ran towards your horse, ignoring the way that Levi and Gunther abruptly stood back and continued on their conversation as if you running to a horse was utterly normal. Skira did not look particularly overjoyed to see you – she grunted as you threw your arms up to pat her neck. “Hello, Skira,” you said, unsuccessfully fighting off a grin. “How is the northwest
The horse pushed you away and looked quite like she was glaring at you. You nodded at her, patting her nose as you took off her reigns, to which she projected a much more agreeable aura. “You dare put my horse in a saddle, Ackerman?”

Levi huffed as he smoothly transferred his attention from Gunther to you. “Easily. How dare I try and ride that godforsaken creature?”

“Skira doesn’t like saddles,” you said.

“And I don’t like dirt, but here I am, surrounded by it. Adults get over these things.”

You gave him a look. “If you had your way, you’d have cleaned this entire city.”

“Need I remind you that you literally set my horse free and that it is only due to a small miracle that my damned horse is still at the Academy?”

“No,” you said, moving to unstrap the saddle, “do tell me more.”

“Don’t get rid of the saddle,” Levi snapped. “If I’m to ride with you, I at least need a saddle.”

“Riding with me?”

“You’re going back to the Academy, aren’t you?” Levi said, raising an eyebrow. “And I need to retrieve my horse. If we’re heading in the same direction, then we might as well ride together.”

“How did you know that I was going back to the Academy in the first place? I haven’t even decided yet.”

“You’d be bored here for a week, waiting for the meeting to come up,” Levi said. “You’d miss having people around. And more than anything, I think you’d regret not crashing in on the Friday game and seeing Pixis’s face turn purple because of it.”

You smiled, and Levi’s face softened. For a second, it was sweet and simple and set your chest on fire. The next, Orion’s face flashed before your eyes and your fingers slipped on holding Skira’s reigns.

Levi ducked, neatly catching the reigns before they hit the ground. “Y/N?”

“Oh,” you breathed. “Levi – I know why it didn’t work!”

Looking perplexed, Levi handed the reigns and Skira over to Gunther. “What?”

“The operation! Annie gave me the operation because she didn’t believe that I was a true titan! That’s why the scar was fresh, the main reason for my humanity being scrutinized, right?”

“That would be correct,” Hanji said, appearing over Levi’s shoulder with Erwin in tow. “Why?”

“The operation was meant to be performed over a year ago – of course it wouldn’t work now! Why else would the operation be performed at that age and not before, not as children? It had to be at that age, or it’ll go wrong or not work correctly!” Hanji’s eyes closed as her mouth quivered, and Levi uttered a few words that had Erwin wincing. You, however, were suddenly alive. “I’ve thought that the titan personality was established inside my mind – but Belua was never strong enough to take over. I always had to give her access, allow her to use my limbs as her own. It was how I functioned in the titan castle, how I managed to fool Annie, how I didn’t really think about
Eren until after I’d shut Belua out as Mikasa knocked me out in the dungeon. But now that I think about it, she might’ve been established as a result of Annie’s operation that she did – as the result of a late and therefore inefficient operation!”

“I’m in love with you,” Hanji told you, her feet tapping on the cobblestones. “I was about to say that your blood samples seemed perfectly ordinary, but this – this’ll be great. Why couldn’t you have had this revelation ages ago? This would’ve been so helpful –“

“Any other details that we need to know about?” Erwin interrupted, his hand on Hanji’s shoulder.

You shook your head. “If I remember any, I’ll let you know in a week when I come back.”

“That’ll be enough,” Erwin said. “Now, be careful on the road – our reports have been showing that there’s a high concentration of titans in the east. No idea why; if you wish to use your newfound freedom to investigate, just make sure you make it back.”

You grinned. “But of course.”

For now, this would be enough. It would be enough to start figuring things out and have the freedom to do so. And it was more than enough as Isabel started cheering when she saw you climb into Skira’s saddle, even as the horse started grumping about it.

Levi raised his eyebrow at you, and you jerked your head behind you.

He said nothing as he climbed up into the saddle behind you and coiled his arms to grip the front of the saddle, his arms solid around your sides.

You rolled your eyes at the sight of the one bandaged hand, leaning back ever so slightly so that your back could feel the heat of his chest.

For now, this would indeed be enough.

*  

“What’s the plan here? Are you just going to sneak in?”

You looked up at the walls of Assassination Academy, practically glowing in the darkness of the night, and tried to avoid the glare of Jean. “I didn’t really plan this far ahead.”

Levi started laughing silently – you could only tell because his chest started pushing against your back, beating like a second heart. “You are literally known for your dramatic plans,” Marco posed, steering his horse to stand next to Jean’s with skill. “And you don’t have one for this?”

You shrugged. “The best plans are spontaneous.”

“I carry your pardon in my bag,” Levi said, successfully fighting off his laughter. “We can just walk in there with our heads held high and face no punishment.”

“That wouldn’t be dramatic enough,” Petra said, smiling as Oluo groaned. “Y/N has earned the right to at least have fun with this.”

“Need I point out that the longer we spend hiding outside of the wall in this forest, the higher the chances of us being caught by the guards anyway?” Ymir posed, to which you pulled a face.

You looked at the walls again – so terrifyingly tall. There was no way to climb them on this side – not like on the inner side, where vines covered the entirety. Unless you could sprout wings and fly,
there was no way you get up.

“Ah,” you sighed, smiling as Eren and Armin exchanged a nervous glance. “Spontaneity. I love it.”

“No, let’s not do whatever she just thought of,” Sasha said, tugging at Isabel’s sleeve. “She’s got that scheming look on her face.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Isabel asked, to which at least three people groaned, and one laughed. You glared at Mikasa until she stopped her quiet giggle. “Ah, right. I forgot that the last time we participated in one of your schemes, we ended up being like mafia bosses.”

“You what –“ Oluo spluttered, to which Petra shushed him.

“You lot are going to go through the front gate,” you said. “Take Skira. I’ll need some of you to distract the guards on the wall in roughly an hour.”

“I’d ask how you’re going to do it, but the less I know, the less I can confess to when Pixis decides to torture us,” Christa said. “Why an hour?”

“Well, my guess is that you’re going to get in there and be lectured by Pixis for abandoning the school for a solid thirty minutes. If you’re being especially annoying, perhaps forty-five minutes. Then he’ll consider that it’s the game tonight and send you all off to bed to deal with it in the morning, as he’s most likely been drinking this entire evening anyway. I’m being generous. Make it happen.”

Isabel nodded thoughtfully. “Sounds fun. And once you’re in, we split into our teams and compete?”

“Obviously,” Jean replied for you. “Do we have any other option?”

“I am feeling a bit tired –“ Christa started to say, but gave up when her friends gave her a pointed look. “Alright, alright. I know I’ve got Mikasa anyway, so that means I’ve already got an advantage.” Mikasa glared at you with enough gusto that you recognised that she would much rather be in bed as well. You shrugged at her, and she rolled her eyes back at you.

“Well, if we’re taking Skira with us, you two had better get off,” Ymir said.

Levi didn’t hesitate to slip from Skira’s back, holding out his hand to help you down. You slapped it as you followed him to the mossy floor, blowing kisses at the people rolling their eyes at you.

“See some of you in roughly an hour, my dearies. And see the rest of you when I beat all of you to the game.”

“You haven’t realized your most obvious advantage, you know,” Armin said. “You won’t have access to a phone, to call in your answers.”

You blinked before smiling. “Not yet, I don’t.”

“Good luck,” he said, following the group of students now anxiously silent as they contemplated how much trouble they were about to get into. Erwin had also provided them a signed contract that stated they were performing duties essential to the country, being taken care of by Petra, but that didn’t excuse them for the lack of communication between them and the school.

“I have a few questions,” Levi said. “First of all, are you out of your mind? Second of all, why did you drag me into your mad attempt to try and sneak into a school that you could very easily walk into through the front door? And lastly, how are we even going to get to the top of the wall?”
You sat down, leaning against a particularly girthy tree. “For your sake, I’m going to forget about your first question. I can’t actually remember the second question, and as to your third, we’re going to fly.”

Levi closed his eyes and seemed to be counting his breathing for a few seconds before joining you on the ground, but not before carefully placing his cloak along the crevices of the roots. “Last time I checked, brat, you didn’t have wings.”

“No, but we don’t need wings to fly.”

“Ah. 3DMG it is, then.”

“But first, we’ve got an hour,” you said. “If you want to break your other hand in this hour, go ahead. Although I don’t think Hanji will fix it for you out here.”

Levi snorted and didn’t say another thing as said broken hand was suddenly around your shoulders, and he was pulling you in to lean your head against the curve of his waist. “Sleep for a bit. I’ll wake you up in enough time.”

You opened your mouth, about to protest, but suddenly became all too aware of the crushing exhaustion settling itself along the lining of your bones. Of course Levi had noticed it. You murmured against the coarse material of his cloak as he picked it up and slung it around you, his fingers tracing idle pictures along your back.

You fell asleep, thinking of a different time where you two both took naps in a forest similar to this one, a time where you had thought he was a dream.

Now, you knew better; Levi Ackerman was not just a dream.

He was your dream, and more.

* 

“You realize that this is possibly dangerous?”

You smiled, stretching the last traces of sleep from your limbs. “Are you trying to excite me?”

Levi’s face was delightfully blank, even as he strapped the boxes and ties around his body. “I didn’t wake you up so that you could try and distract me from this delightful bit of rule breaking that you have in mind.”

“It’s part of my charm,” you said. “Why follow the rules when you can not?”

You both looked up, scanning the walls, searching for the distraction. You weren’t particularly worried; even without the distraction, Levi could probably get you both over. But the distraction was necessary if you wanted to remain unseen.

A flare blazed into existence on the wall to the left – right where, a while ago, you and three others had eaten apples. Levi sighed – a sentiment you matched. “Hey, when I said distraction, I didn’t exactly tell them to set fire to something.”

Levi glared at you, even as he squatted into something like a crouch. It didn’t occur to you what, exactly, was happening until his body hit you, scooping you up as he squeezed the triggers of the handles and the wires connected to the walls.
Wind – you’d forgotten how wild the wind was when you were soaring through it, and how the entire contraption made you feel like you had left your stomach far behind on the floor of the forest.

But you would have to be dead to forget the way that his arms felt as they cocooned you into the shape of his body, or the way that you had blushed when you had to adjust yourself to fit more closely to him.

Your legs crossed around his waist, your ankles crossing somewhere near the curve of his –

“Keep distracting me and I’ll crash into this wall,” Levi’s voice snarled, and you smiled into his shoulder. It wasn’t comfortable – as you both rose and fell, his hip bones digging into your thighs and his grunts of exertion.

But it was exciting, nonetheless.

You didn’t notice that you were over the wall until Levi landed abnormally heavily, tripping over himself and sprawling onto the ground. His arms locked into place, ensuring that he took the majority of the damage, as you both rolled.

When you came to a rest somewhat due to a tree, Levi groaned. “Your fault,” he said, stumbling to his feet and offering you a hand up.

“For distracting you?” You said, taking his hand and being tugged in close for an embrace.

His body was not built for hugging; his muscles were like rocks, slightly trembling at the abrupt exercise that he hadn’t prepared for. His hands were harder still, clutching at your waist and running his thumbs down the curve of your hips. “Do not,” he murmured into your hair, “distract me when it’s dangerous. Do you not know what I’d do if you were hurt and it was my fault?”

You closed your eyes as you pulled him closer still, circling his neck with your arms. “You don’t have to blame yourself for me giving myself up to the titans, you know.”

“But I do,” he said.

“Stop trying to claim my brilliant move for yourself,” you said, inhaling deeply. Levi’s scent was calming in a way that nothing else was – like lemons, spiced with pepper. “I did it because it is my life. It is my life to do with as I please, and if it pleases me to sacrifice myself to save the people that make my life worth living, I shall do it.”

Levi pulled back, but not entirely – only enough for him to look at your face and grab your chin with those calloused fingers. “Do you think that you owe us for making you happy? Is that it?”

You frowned. “Well, no –”

“Where does this come from, Y/N? The will to keep yourself as the sole person being hurt?”

Temper sparked but failed to catch fire. It was extraordinarily hard to pull up an attitude when Levi’s eyes were so brilliantly clear, a grey that was almost bright in the night. “I don’t know,” you confessed.

“Are we disturbing something here?”

Neither you nor Levi pulled back at the sound of Gunther’s apprehensive voice – just slyly looked to your right. A collection of people were looking exasperated, whilst four were looking much too
pleased with themselves as they emitted the scent of smoke, overpowering the calming smell that was Levi.

“Just sorting some things through,” Levi said, releasing your face with an air of disappointment. You followed him as he walked towards the people waiting for you. “How long until midnight?”

“A few minutes,” Jean answered, but was cut short by the alarm bell sounding midnight. “Shut up, Yeager.”

Isabel grabbed Marco’s hand and took off, squealing the entire way back to the school. Jean blinked and swore, gesturing madly to his team to follow him. Petra did follow him, but not before giving a look of carefully constructed blankness to Levi. Your heart sunk – you weren’t being fair to her. After tonight, you’d sort it out, come clean.

“See you later,” Levi told you, strolling away with Eren and the rest of his team on his heels – a very confused Oluo tagging along with him.

You didn’t wait for anyone else to get a head start on you – you started a brisk jog back to the main building of the school. The wind was so much calmer now that you weren’t soaring through it. As you heard the distinct rumbling of people moving, students ready to go and guess a murder, you began to feel a little unsettled. Before you had had a team, a group of people ready to support you.

But now that small team of people had grown up, had spent months without you learning and growing and knowing things and tricks that perhaps you didn’t.

It was the first time you’d had a little competition in a while, and the thought pleased you as much as it felt foreign.

You slinked around the boy’s Dorm, ducking underneath window ledges so that no stragglers would be able to see you. Sneaking around the door, checking left and right to ensure that no one was near, you ran to the register and began anxiously scanning the names. You were stunned for a moment, not recognising most of them – until you realized that there were first years you’d never met, now. A second year – you were a second year.

The thought was hilarious.

Your eyes hovered over a name, noting how it was a mere two minutes late to clocking in tonight, and a sword appeared in your vision as a person held it over your shoulder. You took a deep breath – scanning the steel to glimpse the person’s reflection.

“You’re looking remarkably well for having abducted over ten people,” they said, and you winced.

You turned, slowly, to see Farlan Church.

And blinked as a sudden realization crashed into you.

Tawny hair that you’d seen before, but grey eyes. “Did you ever have a brother in the underground, Farlan Church?”

It was Farlan’s turn to blink. “I had Levi – but I never knew if I had family.”

“Olyver,” you said. “Your brother’s name is Olyver.”

It was no surprise that you’d trusted Olyver so quickly – he had Farlan’s face. And you, the fool that you were, hadn’t noticed. Hadn’t remembered how Farlan’s jaw was so entirely smooth, and
so entirely the same as Olyver’s.

Farlan did not look like you expected. He shrugged, withdrawing the sword and placing it back in its scabbard. “Well, since you’re back, does this mean that you’ve brought Levi back with you? I’ve been stressed out for days.”

“They’ve been gone for two weeks,” you said, a sly smile creeping onto your face.

“I only started caring a few days ago,” Farlan replied. “I had to do chores by myself that I would normally do with them.”

You laughed. “Aren’t you going to hop on the popular train of assuming I’m a titan?”

Farlan grinned back at you, and you remembered the warm feeling that was impossible not to feel when talking to him. “Unfortunately, I rode that train before everyone else did – it has terrible customer service. Everyone else will find out about that soon – give them time.”

You hummed. “We’re all back – all of us. And at the moment, we’re having a competition to see who can guess the murderer first.”

Farlan raised an eyebrow. “You’re falling right into his trap, you know.”

“Say what now?”

“Pixis knows you, as much as you hate to think it. He’s made a new set of rules since you left and everyone left to search for you.”

The warm feeling of relief that had coloured your blood quickly swept itself away. “What new rules?”

“The body of the teacher is to be placed in the dungeon every night. If an ordinary student goes in and finds it among the cells, they’ll be fine and can continue the game as normal – but if the guards that are hiding there see you…”

“Game over,” you finished as you pouted. “Damn him. I really wanted to see his face as I won.”

Farlan leaned idly against the banister. “Predictable, aren’t you? It’s why I’ve taken to hanging around the boy’s Dorms. I figured that the first thing you’d do was check registers. It’s a basic step; I’m surprised Pixis didn’t set up the trap here, to be honest.”

You bit your lip. “But everyone else – will they be alright? Will the trap include them?”

Farlan mirrored your concerned expression for a moment. “I doubt it. They all turned up an hour ago, right? I heard the warden yelling at the boys for a straight half an hour – snuck out my room to look, too, but Levi wasn’t there. For some reason Eren and Marco asked me to smuggle them matches whilst they were being told off, so I did.”

“I didn’t tell them to start a fire,” you groaned, rubbing your face. “That was their own improvisation.”

“Surprisingly, I don’t doubt it,” Farlan said. “It’s been a while since I saw Eren. He looks – bad.”

You nodded. “He’s getting better, thanks to Jean and Mikasa. But torture – torture takes a while to come back from. I think he’ll make it, though.”

Farlan cocked his head, and you caught on to his meaning as you both dashed in unison around a
corner. Team Greed swung around the corner, breathless. Connie and Petra hung by the door, acting as lookouts, as Jean flung himself towards the register.

“Bad observation skills,” you said, causing Jean to jump.

“Why do you just appear everywhere?” He said, waving you off.

“I let you have a head start,” you said, allowing Farlan to stay hidden as you walked up to meet him. “How are you here after me?”

“We checked the girls first,” Jean said. “Don’t be sexist, now.”

You smiled as Petra and Connie drifted closer. “Something’s come up – this entire thing is a trap for me. If I go to look at the body, I’ll be trapped and imprisoned.”

Petra had the good grace to look shocked, but Connie and Jean shared a grin. Connie slapped you on the back. “Well, if my memory serves, you didn’t always have to look at the body to know who or what killed him, did you? This is evening the playing field, Pride.”

Shock was quickly overridden by a feeling of smug enjoyment. “You’re actually right – thanks.”

Jean gave you a salute as he copied down a brief list of names that he deemed interesting. “Let’s go, then – and prepare yourself, Ymir has already given up. She went to bed immediately.”

“Sloth for the win,” Connie supplied, and the three ran back out.

“They are right, you know,” you said. You turned back to where Farlan swung himself around the corner, sadly smiling at you. “I don’t need to look at the body to know who killed the teacher.”

You held up the phone that you’d swiped from Connie’s pocket as he’d slapped your back and dialled the one number that was programmed onto it. The old, familiar voice of a robot answered immediately. “Hello, student. I want a name, a weapon and the location of the body.”

Farlan didn’t break your stare as you answered. “Farlan Church, his sword, the dungeons.”

“That’s correct, student. Three out of three. What is your team name?”

You hesitated for only a moment. “Pride. Good luck trapping me.” The phone hung up, and you threw it with all of your might out of the door. “Come on,” you said to Farlan, “let’s go.”

“Where?” Farlan asked.

You shot him a glare. “I’m not going to let you be taken into the dungeon. You were the final part of the trap, weren’t you?”

Farlan hung his head as he followed you out of the Dorm and into the night air. “They chose me to be the murderer for the past two weeks. I was the only one left behind, after all – it made sense to them, to make me kill them. Maybe Levi would come back to save me, or maybe you.”

“You did well to evade suspicion for the first week,” you replied, grabbing his hand as you started to run. “But you knew this week you’d get caught, didn’t you? That’s why you didn’t clean your sword properly when you practically shoved it in my face, so that I’d see the blood on it. And why you hung around the register, waiting for me. And why you hid from Team Greed when they came in.”

“I’d call you a genius, but I spoon-fed all of this to you,” Farlan said, annoyingly not out of breath.
as he matched your pace. “You wouldn’t have got it if I hadn’t.”

“Forgive me, but I’m team Pride. I like to think I would’ve gotten it.”

“Only after you walked head-first into the trap.” You couldn’t argue with that, so you stayed silent. The bell signalling the end of the game pealed twice, before cutting off. You began to run faster. “Y/N, where are you taking us? There’s nowhere that’s safe. They’re going to catch me.”

“You want to be caught, don’t you?” You guessed, tugging Farlan behind a tree as a couple of girls walked past, heading back to their Dorm. “You want retribution.”

“I – I forced you into making a horrible decision,” Farlan said, attempting to pull his hand away from yours. “I have now killed two teachers. The only reason I didn’t force myself to get caught after the first one is because I wanted to apologise to you.”

“You wanted to say sorry and then essentially kill yourself?” You said, forcing your voice to be quiet. “What if I don’t accept your apology?”

Farlan blinked, which you could only make out because the pale grey of his eyes were brilliant in the moonlight. “I need to make it up to you, Y/N, but I have just killed –”

“Criminals destined to die anyway,” you finished. “I’ve done worse. I’ve killed innocent people, allowed humans to be butchered in order to cover myself up.”

Farlan was quiet for a moment, taking in what you hadn’t been able to bring yourself to say to anyone else. “And what are you going to do about it?”

“Retribution, right?” You posed. “If I make the world a better place for humans, maybe it’ll be enough. It probably won’t, and I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. But I have to try.”

Farlan stopped trying to loosen the grip of your hand on his and squeezed back. “Retribution. Together?”

Your smile wobbled. “Want to join Team Pride?”

Farlan huffed a laugh that sounded suspiciously like a sob. “Team Sloth sounds far more like my style, to be honest, but I’ll settle for Team Pride.”

“For now, we have one goal,” you said, checking the coast was clear as you tugged Farlan after you. The girls would soon all be heading back to the Dorm – you had to beat the majority of them. “Hide you. I tried to save Gustav from being taken, last year, and it didn’t work. I will not fail with you.”

“You’re going to make me swoon,” Farlan said, and hissed a warning as a couple of lights blinked – the lights of the girl’s Dorm. “You know I’m not allowed to go into this building, right?”

“Since when did you pay attention to rules?”

“Since they provided me with jokes to make about them.”

You hummed a laugh and took a breath. “Sprint for it. Head for the second floor.”

“We’re going to get caught,” Farlan said, but you shushed him.

“Spontaneous. If we get caught, we’ll go from there.”
“I want to resign from Team Pride before I have a heart attack.”

You held your breath as you burst from the tree and sprinted inside. The gold and blue colour scheme of the girl’s Dorm greeted you, with the thick carpet masking your foot falls as you scrambled lightly for the staircase. Farlan was fast – he took the stairs two at a time, bounding alongside you. The corridors were by no means deserted – people were hanging around, bidding goodnight to their friends for the second time in the past few hours. But none of them were particularly wise to the fact that there were two people quietly sprinting down the corridors.

“In here,” a resigned voice said, a door opening behind you. You spun too fast, nearly falling flat on your face, but Farlan was there gripping your elbow.

Both of you ducked into the room, Ymir shutting the door behind you.

“Finally caught on to the fact it was a trap, Pride?” Ymir said, throwing blankets onto her chair. “It took me two minutes listening to some chatter to figure it out.”

“And you didn’t bother to tell anyone?” You said, calming your heart down.

Ymir shrugged. “The only one that was in danger was you, and you were too far away for me to warn you anyway.”

You couldn’t argue with that. “Thanks for letting us in.”

“I’m going to Christa’s room for the night anyway,” Ymir said, waving a dismissive hand around her room. “She gets upset after she has to play a pointless game anyway. You two stay quiet in here.”

Ymir walked out, not bothering with further goodbyes, and Farlan didn’t hesitate to lock the door after her. You crossed the room to ensure the curtains were fully closed, and checked the bathroom was clear. “Ymir doesn’t like decorating her room, does she?” Farlan muttered as you walked back in, satisfied with your checks. “There’s not a single personal item in here.”

You shrugged extravagantly, throwing him the blanket that Ymir had laid out. “You hide under the bed. I’ll stay by the door.”

“I always dreamed of being forced to hide in a girl’s bedroom, but not under these circumstances. This is a disappointment.”

Farlan slid himself under the bed and swore under his breath. “Y/N – your daggers are here.”

“What?”

Farlan didn’t bother coming back out – his arm just poked out, holding two bejewelled daggers that your stomach twisted to see. You took them from Farlan, the metal of their blades clinking quietly against each other. The white jewel winked at you, whilst the black one merely glittered.

This was how they said hello, after being separated from you for so long.

But you had no idea why Ymir had them.

“You’re not planning on leaping into action, are you?”

“Not tonight,” you said. “Not tonight.”
Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for the delay lads - I lost someone very recently and it really shocked me, but I'm getting better! Enjoy the chapter regardless xoxo
The Bargain

You woke up from your doze the moment before someone knocked on the door.

The daggers were in your hands before you had a chance to think about it, and you eased yourself from the seat with the ease of a feline. Farlan – due to him still being asleep or being scared stiff – stayed silent, and you didn’t dare breathe loudly enough to think about hissing a warning.

The doorknob jingled, and you backed into Ymir’s bathroom, twisting yourself to stand in the shower – thanking the merciful fact that it hadn’t been used in a long time and it was bone dry. You covered the white jewel of the dagger in your right hand to stop any potential flashes, and rose the black one to eye level, just in case you needed to throw it.

The person on the other side sighed and the scraping sounds of a key being used cut through everything else – because Ymir hadn’t taken her key with her. Farlan had used the key to lock the door last night.

The door opened and you held your breath.

“Seems empty to me, Sir,” Petra said, and you heard the muffled steps of her footsteps. You heard your blood thundering as the sounds of her searching the room echoed. “I don’t understand why the SO squad has to search every room, anyway.”

“Less talking, more finding,” Pixis said, sounding resigned. “The only reason I’m not there searching is because the rules state that no male is allowed to enter the bedrooms of females.”

Petra tutted as she entered the bathroom.

She turned to the right first, sweeping the entirety of the bathroom before catching sight of you. Her eyes didn’t even widen.

“All clear,” she called, walking out of the room and locking the door behind her.

You stayed in your position for a few minutes, trying to persuade your heart to calm down. Hearing Farlan’s deep breathing even out in the other room, you started to move – slowly, deliberately. It wouldn’t do to trip now – even if Petra had covered for you once, it was going to be hard to convince Pixis that no one was in Ymir’s room again if the sound of shampoo bottles flying everywhere originated here.

You crouched down by the bathroom door, peering under the bed to catch Farlan’s wide-eyed gaze.

“Good morning,” he whispered.

You smiled shakily. “Nice to see you not in a dungeon.”

Farlan made the move to shrug but thought better of it, considering he’d wedged himself into the furthest corner underneath the bed. With a grace that you begrudgingly admired, he eased himself closer to you so that his head was a mere meter away from yours whilst still being under the bed. “I thought I was a goner when she saw me,” he said.

“For a moment there,” you said, “so did I. But I trust her.”

Farlan blinked. “What happened to you in three weeks? Didn’t you want to kill her at some point?”
“Aren’t all lasting friendships born from wanting to kill someone?” You replied, waving him off. “I don’t deny I didn’t like her a long time ago. But she’s – she’s earned my trust. She makes me want to rely on her.”

Farlan raised an eyebrow. “Pride, relying on someone else. That’s a nice change.”

“You’re on Team Pride, too – you don’t get to insult us!”

“You can’t hide me under Ymir’s bed forever. What’s the plan here?”

You hummed. “I just wanted to see Pixis’s face. It doesn’t matter if they catch me – Levi has my pardon in his bag. I’m basically free anyway – but now the problem is you.”

“Glad to be of service,” Farlan replied, with a fake chipper tone. “You know what the right thing to do would be. It’s the rules – if you’re guessed to be the murderer, you disappear. I should disappear.”

“Oh my god, he’s being an idiot,” a voice said from outside the window, scaring both you and Farlan. Farlan whacked his head on the wood above him, and you nearly stabbed yourself as you jerked your hand towards you, forgetting that you were clenching the dagger. “Let us in, losers – Petra can’t keep Pixis preoccupied forever.”

You and Farlan held each other’s gaze for a moment before coming to a silent agreement. Farlan crept out from under the bed and drew his sword, and you moved to stand by the curtain. Once you were both ready, you slowly opened the curtain just enough to see what was going on.

Isabel, bizarrely, was sitting on the ledge precariously. She shot you a wink that had you rolling your eyes and pointed downwards. You opened the curtain just a bit more to look down – to see a small huddle of people crowding around the bottom of a ladder.

“It’s Isabel,” you said, and Farlan slumped against the wall.

You opened the window, glancing around the grounds. “You realize you live in the girls’s Dorm, Isabel? You could’ve just knocked on the door?”

“But I doubt you would’ve opened it,” Isabel replied. “Not with Pixis doing investigations into rooms.”

You inclined your head. “Are we coming out or you coming in?”

Isabel jerked her head. “You two are coming out. You can’t stay there for much longer.”

She scrambled down the ladder, and you didn’t hesitate to come down after her. Farlan followed a little more slowly, carefully closing the window after he’d climbed out. You bumped fists with Mikasa at the bottom. “How’d you guys do last night?”

“Shut your face,” Mikasa replied lightly.

“You,” Isabel snapped at Farlan, who looked faintly green at the prospect of her anger. She jabbed a finger at his chest. “What are you on about, ‘I should disappear’? Care to explain?”

“Isabel,” you said, but Ymir coughed bluntly. You glanced around – there were no boys here, just the girls. They’d probably rallied in response to having their rooms searched, knowing full well that Ymir’s room had hidden you and Farlan. “Why’d you have my daggers?”
Ymir didn’t look bothered in the slightest. “I stole them from the guard that retrieved them. Thought you’d want them back.”

“Then why didn’t you give them to me?” You asked, noting the way that Christa was biting her lip as she looked around anxiously.

“Not many opportunities to come back and get them from the Underground,” Ymir said, and nudged Christa with her hip. “Stop being nervous.”

“Petra can’t keep Pixis busy forever. He’s already searched the boys’ Dorm – we thought that if we moved Farlan there, he’d be safe.”

You nodded slightly at Christa. “How did you know that Farlan was the one that did it?”

“Ymir told me,” Christa said. “I hope for your sake the boys have figured it out too – otherwise they’re going to be very confused when we turn up.”

“We can’t keep hiding him forever,” Sasha spoke up – but only because she’d just jolted herself awake from napping against the bush. “I mean, not that I’d mind hiding a hot boy in my room forever, but it’ll get difficult.”

You tuned back into Isabel and Farlan’s whispered shouting match. “You’re a fool if you think you can get away from me, Farlan Church.”

“Oh please,” Farlan hissed a reply, “you just left me on my own with no information for two weeks. It’s not me who wants to get away, Isabel. It’s you.”

“Can we fight later?” Christa squeaked, her eyes on the door. You glanced at it and saw her reason for concern – the knob was turning.

“Hide the ladder,” you hissed, and Ymir immediately dragged Christa out of sight into the bushes as Mikasa practically threw the ladder onto the grass. Isabel and Farlan went more slowly, more caught up with each other than the sight of Pixis opening the front door of the Dorms.

You did what any good friend would do.

You pushed them both sharply to the ground and started strolling straight for Pixis.

“Good morning,” you bid Petra, who looked stunningly unimpressed. She glared at you, and you could hear her words – ‘I covered for you only for you to give yourself up? Are you serious?’

Pixis pulled a flask from his coat and took a long drag.

“I hope for your sake that was coffee,” you told him, strolling to the opposite side and drawing their attention away from the commotion.

“You have horrible taste,” he replied, and gestured idly for Petra to approach you. You didn’t particularly fight her off as she drew your hands behind your back and cuffed you, snarling a little at her only for the effect. “Did you really miss the dungeons that much?”

Your palms turned sweaty. “Can’t we just put me in the kitchens? I promise to stay there.”

“No use putting her in the dungeons if she’ll just escape, Sir,” Petra said, her hand sliding into yours out of Pixis’s sight. “I can secure one of the classrooms. It’s the weekend, after all.”

“What use is having dungeons if we don’t use them?” Pixis said but started to walk towards the
school all the same. “But I agree, they do smell awful.” You refrained from making a comment how his breath was much the same and kept walking, not daring to glance behind and see if Farlan had gotten away. “That’s a nice bracelet, Miss Ral.”

It was Petra’s turn to have her hand turn clammy. “Thank you, Sir.”

“I’ve seen quite a few students wearing those leather bands,” Pixis continued, leading the way with his eyes now happily closed. “I wonder what they mean.”

“A mystery,” you said. “Maybe it’s a cult.”

Petra squeezed your hand in warning and steered you up the staircase to the second floor. “Let’s go to a maths classroom, shall we? Nothing more like torture than maths,” Pixis said.

“I raise you physics,” you replied.

Pixis looked like he was enjoying himself immensely. “Denied.”

Petra kicked open a door and sat you at one of the desks, cuffing you again to the chair. “Would that be all, Sir?”

“Continue the search for Church,” Pixis said. “I have no doubt miss L/N gave herself up in order to distract us from something to do with him.” You gave him what you hoped was the best attempt at a charming smile, but Pixis merely opened his flask again and bemoaned at the emptiness of it. “Where’s Ackerman?”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” you said. “It’s quite a popular name, you know.”

Pixis’s eye twinkled. “Why, planning on it being yours one day?”

You blushed and cursed yourself for doing so. “What can I say, Mikasa is simply irresistible. Maybe if you’re nice, we’ll invite you to our wedding.”

“Unfortunately, there will be no free time for the entirety of the second-year students that did not come back,” Pixis said. “You may have to delay that wedding. Miss Ackerman will be in detention for the rest of her life, if I get my way.”

“You can try and separate our love, but you shall not succeed!”

Pixis laughed, then. He sat himself on one of the small student’s chairs, looking quite out of place surrounded by maths formula on the walls and the pleasant shining of the morning light. “Are you quite done messing around?”

“I can keep this up all day, actually,” you replied.

“Anything to buy your friends time, I suppose,” Pixis said. “I don’t believe you’re a titan, miss L/N. I knew as much from the moment your infernal friends returned alive. I apologize for setting a little trap – I assumed you’d still be furious at Farlan Church for forcing you to show your hand last time you two were in the same vicinity.”

“You thought I’d want to kill him,” you realized. “He was bait for me - not to save, but to kill him myself.”

“Just so. When I realized that of course your humanity was somehow still intact, I knew you’d seen it as a challenge to rescue him from my grasp. You do enjoy seeing enemies everywhere, do you
You leaned back into the harsh plastic of the chair, wincing as the edge of the handcuff bit into your wrist. “And so you arresting me?”

Pixis shrugged. “Dramatics, I suppose. I wanted to see your face as I suggested the dungeons.”

Your blush from his insinuation before had long faded – but now a different reason caused colour to swell into your face, heating your cheeks. “You sadistic –“

“Ah – none of that,” Pixis interrupted, holding up his hand. “Let’s not forget that you came back primarily to see my face when you won the game.”

“And what now? You finally are convinced of my humanity – I have the final bits of proof in Levi’s bag, if it pleases you to see it. What of Farlan?”

Pixis gave you the first serious look since you’d both sat down. “You realize he got caught, and that we have no need for people who make such blunders at Assassination Academy? By the rules, he should be sent off to the same place that the others are.”

“Where is that, exactly? I freed Gunther from that fate – what is it?”

“They do spend some time in the dungeons, it’s true,” Pixis said. “After all, they do the first part of the torture themselves – mere imagination. It’s an excellent tactic, you know. But after a few days, we offer them a position in the army. I’m surprised you didn’t notice them when we had that delightful school trip.”

You paused – of all the things, you hadn’t expected that. “But the people haven’t finished training! You can’t employ them into the army without having finished training.”

Disappointment caressed Pixis’s face for the briefest of moments. “Often, the Friday game is the last test of their skills – to see if they can indeed kill under command. Most of the students that we choose are often talented enough to survive without their full three years of training in the Academy; besides, the army needs fodder.”

“That’s wrong.”

“Do not,” Pixis said, a stroke of danger growling under the pleasant pitch of his voice, “preach morals to me. There is blood on your hands, just as much as there is on mine.”

You leaned forwards, ignoring the insistent bite of metal around your wrist. You couldn’t help the anger that rose to your defence, twisting your lip and manipulating your face into the makings of a snarl. “I was doing what I had to do to survive.”

“You murdered innocents.”

“Yes – and I made sure that I was smiling the entire time. I am their princess – beloved, holy. Do you really think that I could have hesitated in my actions and still have that title to my name?”

Pixis was getting angry, now, too. You didn’t know why you were fighting this case – Pixis was an ally in the war against titans, he was aware of your humanity, he was planning on helping you. But you didn’t get that vibe as he said the following words without even an animalistic trace of rage. “You did not need your title more than those people needed their lives.”

It hurt in its true bluntness. But you would be damned before you let this man condemn you
without making him aware of your motivations. “If I want to make them change, I need that title. If I decide to make their rules collapse from the inside, I need that title. If I want to destroy everything that ever made me hurt other people and smile whilst doing it – I will need that damned title. I will use whatever weapons they ever gave me in order to rip them to shreds; be that my title, or my daggers, or this very body. Do not presume that I do not hate myself for it. I do – but I hate them more.”

Pixis stood up, and the movement was so entirely fluid that it startled you from your anger. You realized there was a reason for it as Pixis stumbled slightly to the left, his balance shifting – the man wasn’t fighting you to make a point. He was fighting you because he was drunk, because he was sad and tired and old and saw his own desperation in yourself.

“The boy can walk free,” Pixis said, grumbling as he moved to the door. “I doubt Ackerman would allow Erwin Smith to employ the boy he considers to be his brother anyway.”

“I’m still handcuffed,” you said, just as Pixis turned and shut the door behind him. He laughed as he walked away, as if you’d just told the funniest joke in the world. You sighed, looking out of the window. It was going to be one of those days, you supposed.

You stayed in the chair for a few minutes, allowing yourself to mould your spine into a comfortable slump. It was nice, you thought, to be back in a classroom in the Academy. Here was where you collected tools and skills and friends – here was where Pride had been born, as well as the Seven Deadly Sins. Here was where Annie had followed you, once.

Somehow, you didn’t doubt that she’d do it again.

“Y/N?” Levi called, poking his head through the door. “Oh, here you are – Petra sent me along.”

You didn’t reply. “I hear you are to thank for getting Farlan excused, but also to blame for him being put in that position to start with. So I guess they neutralize themselves.”

“Tell me something,” you said, watching as Levi shut the door behind him and swung a chair around to sit hunched over the back, his eyes gleaming. “Am I a good person?”

Whatever Levi had expected, it hadn’t been that. He was careful to not show it, though – veiled the emotions as they ran across his face. If he were a few inches further away, or if you had known him for a less amount of time, you wouldn’t have noticed. “You think I’m the best person to ask?”

“You’re the only person I care to ask,” you replied.

Levi Ackerman was beautiful, you thought. You’d always known it, obviously – with his raven hair, his eyes. But it hit you then, in a sunny classroom with formula scribbled on the walls. It hit you quite lovingly, like a wave of warmth that started much the same way that the irresistible light in his eyes did – with a hint of violence that softened into a glow.

“This is war,” he said. “There are no good or bad people. There are just people willing to do different things in order to get what they want.”

“It was easier to let myself be a titan, you know. It was easy to revel in the violence, to not feel anything except wrath or hunger. It was so easy – like breathing.Existing didn’t hurt like it does now.”

“Hurting is irrefutable proof that you are human,” Levi said, leaning back in his chair. “It proves you can feel other things. If you’re searching for proof that you’re arguably the best of us, that’s it.”
“What if I don’t want to feel anymore?”

Levi didn’t look surprised or disgusted, much to your own shock. You hadn’t planned to let that revelation slip – you’d meant to keep it tucked away in the shadows of your mind, much akin to the place that you’d stowed Belua. But the man before you didn’t look shocked, or pitying.

He looked rather cunning, actually.

He stood from his chair and instead sat on top of the desk in front of you, placing his feet either side of your thighs. “If you didn’t feel anything,” he murmured, fingers bold as they grabbed your collar and pulled you towards him, “you wouldn’t feel this.”

He let his lips barely touch your own before he withdrew and instead kissed your jaw line down to your neck, feeling for the beating of your pulse with his tongue. Once he’d found it, his teeth closed around that spot, his hands now stroking the lines of your collarbones.

You closed your eyes, unable to speak as he began unbuttoning the top few buttons of your shirt, allowing him to release the hot tension he’d been calling into being at the very top of your neck, just below your jaw. He didn’t give you the opportunity to catch your breath – he just continued his journey down your throat with his tongue and lips, skipping from mere grazes to hot, open-mouthed kisses.

The moment he bit you where your neck met your shoulder, your eyes flew open and jerked against the bite of the metal at your wrist.

He licked over the hurt, looking up at you from under his eyebrows. His eyes had darkened to a magnificently deep black, and once he’d seen you looking, his hands slipped into your shirt to ever so lightly trace the lines of your body.

“Are you trying to convince me to stay alive by using — *this* — as a persuasion tactic?”

“Anything,” Levi said, just as his fingers grazed the dip between your breasts. “I will do anything to make sure that you stay alive.”

You blushed furiously and allowed your mortification to disappear as he finally kissed you as deeply as you needed. You had kissed Levi four times – the first, just inside the walls after he’d rescued you. The second, a sweet thing where you’d fought off the fever. The third, a desperate thing after seeing him for the first time in months. The last, it had been a signal that you wanted it to work.

This kiss was nothing like any of the others – it was not need, or fire, or sweet, or full of an ulterior motive.

It was just pure and simple appreciation.

He pulled back, releasing your lip from between his teeth. You leaned forward, resting your forehead against his, unwilling for it to end. You felt his forehead shift into a frown and squinted at him in response.

“Is that worth giving up?”

“You’re being awfully egotistical about the quality of your kissing technique,” you replied, the sudden realization hitting you – you hadn’t washed for a while. You’d been travelling, and then saving Farlan from being arrested – and Levi had known that.
The man who hated dirt had just tasted every inch of your neck, knowing damn well it was not the cleanest thing in the vicinity.

A grin was impossible to escape.

“Someone has to flatter me,” Levi said. “It may as well be me, because I’ll do it right.”

He was right, which was irritating.

You wanted life – and life was only that if you were a human.

Levi probably saw you come to the decision and stood up, stumbling strangely as he looked down with just a hint of a blush. “Right – I’ll leave you now. See you around.”

“You’re just going to leave?” You said, indignantly shaking the cuff around your wrist so that it jangled. “I’m still chained here!”

“Don’t tempt me,” Levi muttered, already tying his jacket around his waist and adjusting his trousers.

“I knew you and Erwin were into chains,” you sniped.

Levi turned on his heel to give you one last kiss, an insistent thing that left you very much angered he was leaving you. “I don’t want to hear another man’s name on your lips for a while. Enjoy your weekend.”

The man walked rather oddly out of the room, his face carefully falling into nonchalance just as he closed the door behind you. You tutted as you wriggled in your own chair, trying to angle your wrists in the right way to pick the lock and trying to dispel the heat that had gathered at the small of your back and stomach.

You had things to do today, after all.

It was only a week at Assassination Academy, after all – and then you had to make your way back for the council meeting. You wanted to do some sneaking, perhaps some learning, definitely some laughing.

If you were going to have life, after all, it may as well be worth it.
The Ministers

A week did many things to change a person.

A week ago, you wouldn't have thought it was possible to experience anger such as this, to this extent. It was everything – it was your hands itching to punch the man on the floor again, it was your breaths coming sharp and short.

“I want to abolish the murder game at Assassination Academy,” you finished, turning stiffly on your heel to resume shuffling the papers on the table in front of you, your back straight. The people sat around the table were grave, faces carved into stone – so much so that you were almost shocked into silence every time their eyes shifted to look around, or their lips parted the tiniest amount to breathe.

“That’s all, then – we’ll have a fifteen-minute break until we join to discuss the changes proposed by – by Miss L/N.”

The people here were vastly different from Assassination Academy.

At school, you were something along the lines of a celebrity, a princess crowned by the faith and love of her peers. At school, you were undeniable, a force of nature, a blackout, a thunderstorm with a heartbeat.

In the room that was a council meeting, however, you were the enemy.

You could feel it even as you stood to leave it – the hatred. How the older people in this room detested your existence, how they loathed the fact that you had earned the right to be in the same room as them, how they hated the way that you listened and spoke to them as if they were equals.

Erwin held the door open for you and inclined his head in the direction of his office – and both of you were wise enough to stay silent until you’d reached the small room.

“Are they always like that?” You groused, slumping onto Erwin’s desk. Erwin huffed an echo of a laugh as Hanji and Levi followed you both in, bickering about something nonsensical.

“Old, stuffy, jealous of youth? Yes. I’ve never known them as anything different.”

“Figures,” Hanji said, throwing open a window to abolish some of the heat that stifled the room. “Your first council meeting, and they’re intent on ruining it.”

“The journey back here was hard enough,” you agreed.

Erwin raised an eyebrow, to which Levi punched his arm – and you dutifully pretended not to see, flicking your eyes deliberately over to Hanji to watch her moan about the temperature. Levi and you had travelled back to the city together – back on your respective horses, both human and beast much happier about the arrangement.

“When were you going to tell me about the changes you proposed back there?” Erwin asked, eyes closing. You watched him carefully – if the man didn’t need to watch your face, there must have been something that he’d already figured out, that he’d already decided that he knew. “You want to get rid of the midnight game?”

“Of course; it’s barbaric. And now that I know how the murderers are chosen every week and what
happens to them if they’re caught, I’m moral enough to stop it.”

Levi watched the exchange with the perfect expression of boredom – he may well have been watching a sporting match. “Y/N L/N preaching about morality – there’s nothing that can surprise me now.”

“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch,” Erwin said, eyes still closed. Your heartbeat increased on a whim, picking up on the nearing danger that your other senses hadn’t fully recognised yet. You stood firm – you weren’t going to let anyone scare you. Not anymore. “The King says we cannot control you,” Erwin said, his fingers clasped together and his chin resting lightly on top of the arrangement. “You may now have a seat on the council from being the Ruler, but you’re still…”

“The royal figurehead for the cannibalistic race of monsters?” You finished, sitting and leaning back in a chair with an air of impertinence that you hoped annoyed him. Levi snorted from where he stood, leaning back into the corner. “So what? They’re going to deny my right to make decisions?”

“Unless you can be controlled,” Erwin nodded. “If they knew for sure that you were loyal to the human race, there wouldn’t be a problem.”

“How do I prove my loyalty?” You asked, incredulous. Just how much did those fools want you to bleed?

“You don’t need to prove anything,” Hanji said, her glasses flashing in the weak light. Levi grumbled his agreement – and although your heart fluttered at their unanimous support, your lips were still inclined in a scowl.

“How would you prove your loyalty…” Erwin mused. You held your breath, watching his eyes glimmer with thoughts. “I suppose, through marriage.”

A laugh gurgled its way up through your throat. “Marriage?”

“They know you stand to be married to a titan,” Erwin said, eyes on the iron ring that clung to your finger. “Knowing that that particular tie had been severed would make them feel better.”

“You want her to get married?!”

You ignored Hanji’s yelp as ice crept into your veins. The man before you was serious – deadly, utterly serious. His eyes lifted from your ring to your face, and settled there with a look of cool, blatant nothingness. “It might be the only thing to convince them that you aren’t going to go back to the titans once you’ve gotten enough information.”

It took a beat of silence for you to stop your laugh dead in its tracks. “I could have wrecked humanity several times by now if I had wished to do so,” you hissed. “I have and have always had that power. Why would they think that I would wield it now?”

“You literally went and punched a minister in the face,” Eld said from the other side of the door, which startled you for the briefest of moments – you hadn’t realized that he was there.

“He threatened Eren!” You shot back, ignoring the fact that he couldn’t see the malice in your eyes through the door. “He wanted to go back to the point that they made a year ago – that he was secretly a titan all along. It’s stupid and ridiculous; he spent months in my own dungeon, for titan’s sake.”
“Levi has also threatened Eren,” Erwin said, quietly.

Your head whipped involuntarily to the corner where Levi was – or had been. The ajar door clearly showed where he’d gone – and it was clear what, exactly, had pushed him over the edge. Hanji’s eyes tracked you as you shakily stalked to the door and stuck your head around the edge – but there was no sign of Levi on the other side of the door. “You knew that would piss him off, sir,” she said.

“Perhaps,” he replied, and stiffened as you turned on your heel to glare at him.

“What were you thinking, talking about marrying me off like chattel in front of him?” You said, but your voice was void of any real anger. Erwin knew what he was doing, always – maybe he was perhaps the only person you could trust to truly handle you.

“I won’t allow you to be bonded to some idiot,” Erwin carefully said.

“Neither will I, since I’m not getting married!”

“Not even to me?” Erwin asked, not moving from his pose. You felt his steel gaze on you, the weight of his full attention immense. Hanji let out a startled breath, but as you turned to look at her, her eyes were carefully guarded.

Your hands clenched, and your iron ring bit into your finger. “I was going to be married for power before,” you said, quietly. “It didn’t work out well.”

“Do not make the mistake of comparing me to Orion.”

You blinked at the surprising amount of power Erwin injected into his voice with blistering force. He wasn’t bragging – he was angry at the comparison. Insulted – you had insulted him. “I will not marry for power.” Erwin’s face was still. You didn’t even think that he was hurt by your rejection – he’d probably already known your answer from the moment he’d even thought of a potential solution.

“Would the princess of titans marry for love, then?”

You rolled your eyes at the teasing tilt to Erwin’s voice. “Why – fallen for me, have you?”

“Insolent fool,” Erwin said, but the words were void of insult. “I fall from nothing except grace, and even then I will attempt to fly.”

“Pretty words,” you scoffed, waving a hand. “Let’s focus on the real issue here, shall we?”

Hanji stiffened as she closed her eyes. “The issue of the titans attacking soon?”

“Soon isn’t the word,” Erwin replied. “They’ve already hit many of the outlying towns and villages outside the wall. They’ve been attacking us constantly for weeks now; I wouldn’t be surprised if they have an army ready and waiting for the final blow.”

Both of the commanders looked at you with solemn gazes, and you frowned in concentration. “Their numbers were severely depleted – I didn’t know about any impeding attacks.”

“Don’t tell the ministers that,” Hanji said, waggling her fingers despite the dire shift in mood. “They’ll think you’re deliberately playing dumb.”

“If they have an army, we need an army,” Erwin said, again commanding both of your attentions.
“You know who I will call on to bulk our numbers.”

Your blood turned to ice. “You cannot ask the Academy. They’re young, they’re not trained –“

“The same way that you yourself are young? They’ve been trained as long as they could have been – this is what they were training for. If I do not command them to fight for me, all of the years they’ve spent at that school is a waste.” Erwin’s words were powerful things – you couldn’t argue with that kind of logic. But still, you opened your mouth to argue.

It seemed that Erwin was waiting for you to fall into that trap.

He held up his hand.

“If you won’t be persuaded by me, be persuaded by them.”

Hanji huffed a sigh as she pushed away from the wall, opening the door to Erwin’s office and gesturing widely for you to follow her. You didn’t bother to bid a goodbye to Erwin as you left, giving the man who had proposed to you absolutely nothing in ways of farewell.

Hanji did not lead you far – just down the corridor, actually.

Isabel opened the door as soon as Hanji knocked on it – far too quickly to have been casual. “Ah, Pride and the crazy woman.”

Hanji gave you a sideways smile. “Which is which?”

“We spend every minute of our lives trying to answer that question,” Jean droned from his place on the sofa, lounging in Marco’s lap. “I can’t believe Erwin told us to get up early to come here.”

“He said that the Queen always has to discuss with her court before making a decision,” Christa tagged along, chiming in from the window. “So naturally we had to pack up and follow you.”

You rolled your eyes, despite the fact that seeing them made your stomach turn to stone. They were all there – bar the titans. “Are you aware of what Erwin Smith is going to ask you to do?”

Isabel sharply dug her shoulder into yours as the room collectively scoffed. “Of course we do. And of course we know you want to be stupid about it.”

“Just let us fight, Pride,” Eren said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world to make that decision. “I need to catch up to Mikasa on our ‘killing titans’ count. She’s ahead by a measly number –“

You weren’t surprised to see Farlan sending a grin to Petra. “Like, twenty.”

“A pathetic number indeed,” Connie said, shaking his head. “In years, that’s two decades.”

“I didn’t know you could count,” Sasha replied.

You shut the door sharply behind you and dragged Hanji to sit with you on the opposite sofa to Jean and Marco. “This isn’t deciding what to do about dinner. This is a matter of people dying.”

Jean fixed you with a glare. “We know what war means. And I don’t know what spurred them to do it, but it must have been something that you’ve done.”

You rolled your eyes at Jean, kicking your feet up so that they rested on the table next to the books that Armin had likely been scouring for information. “Well I haven’t exactly been discrete about
my doings since leaving. They probably know about my ‘Ruler’ status, about how I routed out and destroyed all titans from the underground.”

“Bet that made them all stroppy,” Sasha remarked, not taking her eyes off of the tower of bread she and Connie were constructing. Isabel snorted, making Petra flinch. You tried not to shrug as she focused those molten gold eyes on you – and scowled.

“Don’t you go laughing,” Petra scolded you, raising an eyebrow and poking her tongue out at you. “You of all people should know how they will stab us.”

“With big, big pointy sticks,” Isabel cooed, pouting and poking her in the side lightly. “And maybe if we’re lucky, a metal stick.”

“If we’re lucky, they’ll stab us with swords?” Jean repeated, incredulous.

“No, metal sticks! Didn’t you hear?”

You nudged Isabel with your elbow, succeeding in shutting her up for the moment. “I’m sad that you didn’t all come into the minister meeting with me – it would have been fun to watch them all laugh at you instead of just insulting me.”

“Why do you look so pleased that they insulted you?”

You gave Armin a knowing look. “Because I don’t have to pretend to like someone if they’ve insulted me.”

“Delightful, you are,” Petra said. “Point is, the SO squad will follow Levi to war regardless of whether or not you command us to.”

You glared at her but knew that it was a losing battle the moment she sent a charming wink right back at you. She drifted over to the window to look down at the grounds below, and Isabel drifted with her – leaving you to deal with Hanji frantically scribbling into a notebook from where you weren’t entirely sure she’d been keeping it. Conversation descended easily into their little inner groups – as if you hadn’t brought the topic of war into the room.

You scowled and moved closer to Petra and Isabel from where they were looking down.

“We find the people that we adore in the weirdest places, don’t we?”

Isabel glanced sideways at Petra, a look that only you were aware of. You stood on tip toes to peer out of the window over Isabel’s shoulder - spotting Levi and Oluo as they bickered below, unaware that three of the deadliest soldiers watched them from above. You were momentarily lost in watching how small Levi looked from four floors above – and so when Isabel spoke, you had to make an effort not to flinch. “We do.”

You backed away as the two girls continued to watch the people below, not quite ready for anything more than a conversation, and smacked into Ymir.

“For someone who boasts such superior instincts,” Ymir said, an eyebrow raising coolly, “you don’t have such a brilliant sense of surroundings.”

She righted her shirt, and for the second time today, your heart stopped.

Thankfully, at that moment, Connie and Sasha’s tower of bread fell over amidst cheers and vaguely distressed cries – one of which being Christa’s high voice, which succeeded in distracting Ymir.
It did not succeed in distracting you from the sight of the tips of a black tattoo peaking over her shirt as she’d righted it.

*Ah.*

Everything you’d known about Ymir shifted on its axis – every conversation, every moment where you’d looked at her – they now shredded any casual tone that they’d held before and twisted into something more sinister.

*Hello, titan.*

Titan – Ymir was a titan. She was yours in every sense of the word – but acting separately from Annie, Bertoldt and Reiner. They had been dedicated to you and you alone – Ymir was by no means like that. The only person she cared about, truly and utterly, was Christa Lenz.

You tried not to look like you were having a crisis and forced your feet to move – towards the same sofa that you’d just vacated. Hanji, luckily, was more than happy to let you sink down next to her and continue your musings.

Your thoughts were less about Ymir and more about what manner of creature Christa Lenz was. Especially to have a titan completely and utterly wrapped around those delicate, lovely fingers.

And Kenny Ackerman had known what it was – it was why he’d taken Christa instead of anyone else when threatening you and Levi. The man running rampant in the city below had known, and you’d just let him get away with it, thinking it wasn’t as important as your plan.

You didn’t dare look at Christa too closely.

It was less of a question about who she was rather than what she was.

Loveliness and a certain innocence layered into the tiny girl’s moves no matter where she decided to go – things that seemed instinctive to her, as ingrained into her being as breathing. Things that were everything opposing being a titan.

But you’d thought the same of Annie, Bertoldt and Reiner.

You hadn’t thought of them as titans until they’d stepped forwards as traitors. Were you falling into the same trap with Christa Lenz?

There was no way that Ymir didn’t know about your occupation – no way that she didn’t know that you were above her, that she had to obey you. But in all of the times where you and she had interacted – it had started frigid. It had started with her wanting nothing to do with you, unless it involved being furious that you’d walked into Christa.

Christa had to be more important than you – and Ymir’s obsession had started far too early to be anything to do with Christa’s personality. There had to be something deeper.

“I think she’s plotting ways to kill us, personally.”

“I bet my share of dinner that she’s literally just thinking about how hot the Ackermans are.”

“Done.”

“You two need to stop betting food on everything. Start asking if Armin would do what you’re doing, and if the answer is ‘no’, don’t do it.”
“Magnolia, you’re the biggest hypocrite.”

“Shut up, horseface.”

“Didn’t I tell you all that the horse jokes are getting old?”

“I was just calling you by your name, you know – no horse joke intended.”

You blinked and came back to the room you’d momentarily left. “Someone needs to pay up their share of dinners – I was actually thinking about how nice Mikasa’s hair is.”

Mikasa shot you a loaded stare that told you that not only was she unamused, she was also very much not fooled by your act. You sent her what you hoped passed for an innocent shrug and sent a grin to an angry Connie and a victorious Sasha.

“Oh – your daggers! They’re back!”

Your grin to Sasha turned into a ludicrous grimace. “How unobservant do you have to be to only realize it now? I’ve had them for a week!”

“How did you get them, by the way? I’ve always wondered,” Isabel said, leaning against Petra.

You pouted. “One time, a few years ago, there was a crazed titan who challenged me and the royal family and said we weren’t good enough. She – uh – had the daggers, and I took them after I – you know – dealt with her.”

“Edgy,” Jean said, to which you sent him a glare that told him exactly where you’d be putting your daggers next. He turned a bit pale.

“You killed a titan for her daggers? Titans don’t mess around.”

“I didn’t kill her – just knocked her down a few pegs. I don’t know where she ended up after that – she left her son with us and scarpered. But they don’t mess around – which is why I’m asking you all if you seriously want to go and fight them.”

Eren sat forward, uncharacteristically serious. “It’s always better to fight than to remain stagnant.”

“We all know that we’ll fight,” Farlan said, eyes on Isabel. “We’re more interested in your stories from growing up. Did the titan really just leave her son?”

You gave up trying to scare them away from the fight. “She did. That’s how Orion came to us.”

“What was her name? Was she a relative to Annie? Can you imagine the drama that would cause...”

“I can’t remember her last name really,” you said, because it was true. “But I’m sure I knew her first name.”

Marco sighed. “My bet is on Karen.”

“I raise you a Gertrude,” Eren said, back to his normal demeanour.

“Marco is closer,” you laughed. You didn't have to think hard to remember the name of the insane titan - it came to you faithfully, even though you'd spent more than a few months repressing all memories of that time far, far deeper into your brain. “Kuchel. That was her name. My family talked about her for a while – she was truly insane. Something had really pushed her further than
normal titan insanity.”

Hanji perked up at that, muttering about definitions of insanity that you were positive she could be classed as herself. You turned to glance at the door, unsurprised at finding it open – you’d been expecting Erwin to come and collect you for a while now.

But it wasn’t Erwin at the door.

Oluo had come in, looking puzzled at his companion still outside the room. Oluo shrugged, rubbing his head sheepishly as he made his way over to Petra with a small but grateful smile. You made your way over to the place he’d left, peering through the crack to the corridor outside.

Levi was leaning against the wall, his foot tilted against the skirting board. His arms were crossed, and his eyes were carefully collected into the picture of nonchalance. He looked very much like a man who didn’t care about his appearance – caring very much about looking like he did not.

“Levi?”

You let yourself out of the room and shut the door behind you, closing the chatter off in the middle of one of Armin’s comments. “Y/N,” Levi sardonically replied. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Your own attitude rose in response. “Is the attitude about Erwin’s proposal?”

He blinked and shook his head slowly, but just fast enough that the tips of his dark hair dipped into his eyes. “No.” You would have liked to believe him, but the darkening of his eyes warned at danger.

You liked danger, but it was beginning to grind at your already frayed nerves. “Why do you do this to yourself? You torture yourself by acting jealous and sad about things that other people do about me – it’s stupid.”

Levi sighed, but it was less a sound of relief and more of the hissing of steam. “You don’t get to lecture me about my emotions, brat. I have them under control. You are the one who is so afraid of being happy.” You didn’t flinch, but you felt your eyes flare – and he saw it, too. “That’s right – you are so afraid of it! The moment you start to really feel happy, or at ease, you tell yourself that something isn’t right. You start thinking about why you don’t deserve it, or what you’ve done in the past that means you’re destined for a life of sorrow. Is that why you chose me, Y/N? Do I fit right into that life of sadness and torture?”

“Stop it.”

“You should have chosen someone who was perfect,” Levi said, and you felt scared. Not because of his words, although they were indeed the reason your eyes felt like needles were stabbing them. But it was because of the pure lack of emotion in his eyes that you felt fear – you were the one who could decode his mask. You were the one who he let his mask down for.

It had never worked so well that you hadn’t been able to read him.

“You should have chosen someone who isn’t broken, who knows peace as well as their own soul. That’s who you should have gone for – but instead you told yourself that you needed someone to keep you unhappy, and I managed to fit that role perfectly, didn’t I?”

Bewildered and half in tears that you didn’t know were rolling down your face until they’d started dripping from your cheeks, you held up your hands. “What is this about? Erwin?”
“Don’t choose him either,” Levi said. “He’s as broken as I am – more so.”

“This isn’t about Erwin,” you realized. “This isn’t jealousy – this is you lashing out. Tell me why – tell me what you’ve learned.”

Levi shook his head. “No, this is about Erwin. Go and sleep with him for all I care.”

Your eyes narrowed, the tears forgotten. Erwin Smith had nothing to do with this – you doubted Levi even cared enough to be irate about it, let alone be so nastily jealous. “Am I supposed to be scared of you? Is that what you’re trying to do? Scare me into getting what you class as a ‘better’ partner?”

“Depends. Is it working? Feel the need to go and marry someone who can properly deal with you?”

You laughed, and for a moment both you and Levi were shocked at your reaction. “Proper has never been part of the equation when it comes to me,” you said, trying to stop your mouth from twisting into a smile again. “I am hardly something to be dealt with. I am something to be weathered.”

Levi sneered, but your laugh had needled some holes in his cover – his eyes glittered as he looked at you, and the corner of his mouth was wobbling. “I want to protect you,” he said. “And that’ll be very hard to do in this battle coming up.”

The reply was instant. “You don’t need to protect me.”

“Do I not?”

“No.”

It was Levi’s turn to laugh. “Pride will be your downfall. I know damn well you don’t need me to protect you, and that you can do it yourself. But the thing is, Y/N, that you don’t have to. You’ve grown on this mentality that it’s you against the world, that it’s you against the problem, that it is just you against the titans. It’s not. It’s you and me and Isabel and Erwin and everyone in the world who still has a shred of humanity left. So, no – I don’t need to protect you. But I will, because I want to.”

“Y/N,” Erwin called, making you jump. Levi was still – he’d likely clocked his superior the moment Erwin had rounded the corner. “Come on, it’s time.”

Levi patted you on the shoulder, pushing your feet to move towards where Erwin was watching you both. It wasn’t until you’d drawn level with Erwin that Levi spoke again.

“That titan. The one you said was called Kuchel.”

You looked back, but Levi’s eyes were set firmly on the floor. “Yes?”

“Do you know where she went after being kicked into the dirt by you?”

Frowning, you glanced at Erwin – where you found no answers except a level-headed eyebrow raise. “I don’t. There could be records at the royal family’s old mansion, though.”

Levi nodded once before turning on his heel and striding in the opposite direction – not bothering to enter the room where your friends were, where Isabel and Petra were likely waiting for him to come in. Erwin laid a hand on your shoulder as he drew you along, back to the meeting where the ministers were most likely cursing you both for being late.
“Dare I ask what that was about?” Erwin asked, moments before opening the door to the meeting.

“I don’t even know the answer myself,” you told him honestly, before adjusting your belt so that your daggers were clearly on show – polished, more than ready to rip someone’s throat out.

It was going to be a long day.
“It feels strange, not playing the game at midnight,” Isabel said, leaning as far back as the bench would allow. “But I suppose the Class C teachers are all happy.”

“Doubtful,” Ymir muttered, speaking into her bowl of stew rather than Isabel. “They were all fired yesterday and put up for the death penalty. They were criminals anyway.”

You sighed. The game had been the one constant in the Academy life – and you were responsible for taking that away. You hadn’t expected the ministers at the council to humour you into actually acting on your demands; now that you were back at school, awaiting further orders concerning the impending titan attack, the changes were looming over your head.

Someone poked the back of your head. “Keep sighing like that and you’ll never stop,” Petra warned, her finished bowl on her tray. Isabel laughed, and Petra sent her a mock-stern stare. “Don’t you laugh, Isabel Magnolia – you’re famous for sighing as well. You’re all far too old for your age.”

“I think you’ll find that your sentence makes absolutely no sense,” you reply, joining Petra in standing up with your finished tray. “I’m not even looking forward to sleeping in at midnight. Isn’t that strange?”

Sasha spoke around the food already in her mouth. “Now you don’t have an excuse to use the name Pride and beat us all. Maybe that’s the reason.”

Isabel poked her tongue out at you and squawked as you walked away to dump your tray at the canteen’s bar in time with Petra. Petra smiled at you tiredly, but she didn’t even wince in surprise as you intertwined your arm with hers and lightly tugged her from the room, into the entrance hall.

“Come for a walk with me?”

Petra raised her eyebrow, but her steps didn’t falter as she began walking with you out of the doors. “Planning to murder me? It is past curfew, I suppose – and if this is your way of handling the midnight game being cancelled, I expect counsellors will have something to say about it.”

“I did seriously want to kill you at one point,” you told her, and Petra hummed.

“I know. That whole fiasco in the prison that put you in the hospital – I’ve never seen a person look at me like you looked at me. If looks could kill, I’d be floating in a longboat in hell with a martini in hand, preparing myself mentally for evaluation.”

“There is not a single way that hell would accept you,” you said, and meant every word.

Petra looked very much like she doubted you, but it was getting harder to see in the dark. “Religion is always a tricky thing to talk about in our world. But I think Erwin’s got the right idea; no matter what religious interpretation of hell that you have, he believes that he’s heading for it. I think I’ll end up there regardless of my beliefs.”

You shook your head. “I don’t think so.”

“But I do, and that may be all that matters when I die.”

As much as you wanted to tell her that there was no possible future where she’d die, where you’d
willingly let her die, this wasn’t the time for those words. With war looming above all of your heads, you couldn’t afford that lie on your conscience.

Petra squeezed your arm, as though she could read all of these thoughts as they crossed your mind. “You know, you are not who I thought you’d be.”

“I’m not who I thought I’d be either.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” Petra then said, just as a bench beside the lake appeared. You remembered this bench – how one day in summer, all of your friends had just relaxed here and were gloriously young. How one night you’d been dressed in a pretty little dress and planned to cry, until Isabel appeared to bring you back your armour.

“Tell me, what am I doing?”

“You want to apologise to me.”

If Petra felt you momentarily freeze, she didn’t let on. She merely allowed you to slip out of her arm and onto that bench, the cold wood jarring even through your clothes. It was achingly true – you desperately wanted to apologise.

Levi Ackerman, in theory, was finite.

Once he was gone, he would never exist again. The number of atoms that made him up, whilst incredibly huge and close to an uncountable number, had an end. And with war coming ever closer, the number of breaths that he took, too, were limited.

But that was all in theory.

Levi Ackerman, in actuality, was so impossibly infinite that if you really focused on him, the mere idea of him, you would forget your own breathing. Something so natural, so intrinsic as breathing – and you would forget it if you allowed Levi Ackerman to engulf and consume your thoughts.

And Petra Ral was facing losing him.

It knocked you into a place of being where nothing truly existed to even think of a world without Levi Ackerman in it. Or even a world where he existed, but you weren’t allowed to think of him, to touch him, to talk to him.

She was facing that.

Alone.

Of course you wanted to apologise.

But apologising meant that if given the same chance, you would change something. Saying sorry was about change.

You were known for being selfless.

That was the thing that had driven you to give yourself up rather than let the titans attack the people you loved. It was what had led you to become what you had.

But if you were given the choice between choosing Levi Ackerman for yourself or for the beautiful, truly selfless girl in front of you –
You were almost ashamed of how quickly you’d leave her alone. This was perhaps the only selfish choice you had to make.

“I can’t apologise,” you whispered, because it was true. You wanted to apologise – because this girl deserved you to be some semblance of regretful for her, because you truly could not imagine being in her shoes. For a long minute, you thought your whisper had been lost to the wind, because Petra did nothing expect stand motionlessly at the very edge of the lake, allowing the lull of the insects to mask the sounds of her breathing.

“I don’t want you to say sorry, either.”

Petra looked resplendent in the moonlight that dappled through the old oak’s leaves. It made her hair match the molten gold of her eyes, made her eyelashes look longer, made her face seem truly the kindest thing in the land.

You realized that you’d gotten her charm wrong – the one that swung from her leather bracelet was a sun. You’d thought it had been perfect when you were in the Underground – a symbol of what you all were fighting to see again, a symbol of what you all needed more than anything.

The moon was a better thing for Petra Ral.

It allowed her to shine brighter, knowing better than any of you that perhaps she belonged with the other stars.

“I don’t want to marry him,” she said, softly. “My love for him was built on admiration, was built on worship. I can’t promise that’ll go away, but I can promise it was one-sided. It seems to me that your love is more founded on equality. You are both equally at loss for how to love each other, but you do it anyway. He is equally desperate for you as you are for him. You are just as in awe of him as he is of you. I think that’s the sort of fairy tale love that people used to love to read, before the titans came. In years from now, when you’ve faded into legends, I think people will tell the story of you two. The titan princess and the human commander and their love that scorched the stars.”

You blinked away the tears in your eyes. “If they tell the story like that, I’d believe it.”

“Luckily for you, it’s not about believing it,” Petra said, and she opened her eyes. They were clear; the very opposite of yours. “For you, it’s about being it.”

A shout tore through the buzz of insects around you and had you fumbling for your sleeve to wipe your face. “I found them!”

“Good job, Isabel,” Sasha panted, sprinting after Isabel and cannoning into her so that they both fell to the ground across the small clearing. A few lanterns were making their way – much more calmly – through the trees, following the two girls that had sprinted. “We wanted to make sure there were no more arrests happening,” Sasha continued, arranging herself more neatly on the ground.

Petra groaned, even as her face split into a beam. “That was one time!”

“I stole meat from Hannes one time,” Sasha informed Isabel, who seemed like she was readily accepting her new life on the grassy floor. “And he has apparently declared war on me – he recognised me when we went to the city last week and said so. I didn’t even get to eat it because we were only attacked by a few titans!”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve had to ask such a question,” Mikasa said, appearing from the shadows of the trees holding one of the lanterns, “but why is Magnolia on the floor?”
“You realize Sasha is also on the floor?” Connie replied – you blinked before realizing that of course the girls had collected the boys before rescuing either you or Petra.

“That’s an ordinary happening,” Mikasa said.

Sasha had no retort to that – she merely lay down next to Isabel and started talking about the constellations. Lead by Armin and Farlan, Jean and Eren appeared next – strangely quiet. Perhaps the darkness had taken its toll on the titan’s former prisoner.

It was strange for the toll to be taken by Jean as well.

“Marco’s tired tonight,” Armin told you before taking a seat with his back to the tree. “He and Jean had – I don’t know. A fight?” Jean’s silence now explained, you and Petra exchanged worried glances before turning to Armin for a deeper explanation. Jean settled down furthest from your group, Eren not bothering to give him a glance before joining Mikasa on the bench. “They were talking about their future paths and it escalated. It’s their business.”

Marco and Jean had been a pair for as long as you had known them. Perhaps it had been strained after you’d placed them on different teams – or since you’d had Jean arrested and Marco had shown you all quite enough how much he had cared.

Perhaps just as a friend – after all, you’d shown what you would do for Isabel.

But somehow, something whispered that this was not an issue about mere friends possibly going down different career paths.

“Ymir and Christa are taking their sweet time joining us,” you said as Oluo, Eld and Gunther joined the clearing, Petra’s face lighting up as she skipped over to hang off Oluo’s arm. You settled yourself down on the ground across from Sasha.

“They went to bed,” Isabel said, interrupting Sasha’s detailed explanation about how there was a saucepan for boiling potatoes in the sky. “Christa said she didn’t mind a midnight walk, but Ymir wasn’t having it. Said they needed to get ready.”

You frowned. “What, for bed?”

Isabel shrugged, which was quite impressive considering she was lying down. “Guess so.”


All of your friends accounted for.

No more people coming to join the midnight picnic.

And yet, one more lantern was approaching through the trees.

Keeping your eyes fixed on that light, your hand snaked out to find Sasha’s elbow. “Are we sure Christa and Ymir went to bed?”

Ymir hadn’t allowed Christa outside, even though the small girl had wanted to. Ymir, who had humoured whatever whim the girl had even hinted at having. Ymir, who was a beast and had said that they had needed to get ready.
Not for bed.

For something else.

Sasha hissed – not her intention, but because she was trying to say something around the hand that Isabel had shoved over her mouth. You stood up, Farlan already moving to stand at your right. Petra and the boys surrounding her gave you a meaningful glance and melted into the trees, sneaking away from your sight.

You knew that they would be moving to gather their gear before coming back. Because none of you had weapons – your daggers were back in your room, ready for you to grab for the non-existent midnight game.

The lantern stopped just before the bearer could step outside the cover of the trees and reveal just who carried it.

It was at that moment several things made themselves known to you.

None of them were about the lantern and whoever carried it. Instead, all of them concerned Christa Lenz.

You patted Farlan on the shoulder, and he gave you a questioning glance as he helped Isabel to her feet. Valiantly, he also tried to angle his body in front of hers – but any fool who knew Isabel would also not be surprised that she angelically smiled as she kicked him lightly in the shin and stepped around him to stand at his side.

She didn’t need to ask what you were doing, because she trusted you.

For the first time in your life, you allowed Farlan and Isabel to mask you as you turned around and left whatever loomed just outside of sight for your friends.

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Minutes later, you were climbing across from your window to Christa’s.

She’d drawn her curtains already, but you still knocked. Patiently, you counted to ten – then found secure handholds above the glass to take your weight and place a swinging kick right where the latch would be. You rolled inside with the windows folding inwards, the black-stoned dagger in your right hand, throwing your left hand out to catch yourself.

You hadn’t been inside Christa’s room before.

Briefly, you wondered if the number of protective charms that were hung inside were why. But the charms were not written to keep you away, regardless of the monster that was inside you. They were from monsters of a different sort.

Ymir eyed you coldly as she stood up from her chair to close the window behind you. “What are you doing?”

Christa was sitting on her bed, fully clothed in her uniform with her swords strapped to her sides. You didn’t make a move towards her – not with Ymir behind you, bearing her own weapons. “I’m just clearing some things up.”

Ymir looked pointedly out of the window before closing the curtains again. “Must we do this tonight?”
You admired her effort. “I think if it’s not tonight, it’s going to be a long time before we have the opportunity to sit down together.”

Christa didn’t say anything – she didn’t even blink. Ymir huffed a groan as she tugged the neck of her shirt down, revealing her tattoo. “I’m a titan. I have no plans that have anything to do with you, so don’t expect me to start bowing before you.”

“I knew that, you twit,” you said, regardless of her confession and how it had shocked you. “I’m not here for you.”

Ymir’s eyes flared with danger, then. “Christa will say nothing about me to you.”

Christa looked at you, then. You shot her a dark glance. “She’s always known that you were a titan, hasn’t she?”

Ymir inclined her head. “Yes. I could have hidden it from her, if I had wished, but I didn’t. Fortunately for everyone involved, I am better at repressing my other side than you.” You snarled, and she raised an smug eyebrow the moment that you caught yourself. “I don’t snarl, I barely fight, I don’t have to talk myself out of blood lust because I don’t have it.”

“How do you know what I feel and what I don’t?”

“Because you and I are the same monster,” Ymir said, and she unsheathed her sword. “But I’ve grown from it. You’re just running.”

You weren’t foolish enough to fall for the bait and snarl again. “And you’re brilliant at distracting me. I told you, I’m not here for you.”

“If you’re here for her, you’re here for me,” Ymir said, and began swaying the sword at her side.

“Talk to me,” you said to Christa, moving to stand opposite her – more than a healthy distance away. Ymir was not spectacularly pleased at being ignored – but she merely scrunched her nose and moved to stand back at the window.

Christa finally moved – not by much. She kept her eyes on the floor. “I can’t tell you what you want to know.”

After talking to Ymir, your mood was not at the most patient state it had ever been. “Fine. Then nod. You had seen Kenny Ackerman before he took you from my house in the Underground.” Christa closed her eyes as she nodded. Ymir merely growled at the sound of his name. “I thought so. I wondered how you two could have possibly been acquainted before, so I took an opportunity to do a little digging when I was at the city last week. Turns out he used to be on a special army unit above ground. He went on a special mission, would you believe.”

“Kenny Ackerman was part of a special mission to eliminate what the council believed to be the ‘wrong’ branches of the royal family tree. The Reiss family have long served this country, as you well know.” It was true – you had been raised to detest the Reiss family, the rulers of the humans. The very opposite of what you, as a titan princess, was raised to be. “And at the same time where he supposedly killed a girl called Historia Reiss, a girl called Christa Lenz turned up at Assassination Academy with a false identity card that wasn’t particularly questioned by Pixis, as he needed all the humans he could manage to employ into the school.”

Ymir began tapping the tip of her sword onto the blue carpet, but Christa seemed unfazed.

“Your name,” you said, “is Historia Reiss, and you are in line to the throne of humanity. You may
have been a bastard child, but you are still royalty – and for some reason, Kenny Ackerman did not kill you.”

It was why Kenny had threatened her that night in the Underground City. Historia Reiss was the thing that would topple this world and make it anew - and he was testing to see if you knew it. Or perhaps leaving you a hint to the pawn that was one space away from becoming a Queen and winning the long game of chess being played between titans and humans.

“I can’t be Historia,” Christa said, finally. You almost wished she hadn’t spoken – her voice was not the chirp that you were used to, that you associated with Christa. “You know. I thought, of all people, you’d understand. Historia Reiss is to me what your titan persona is. She’s responsible for all of the death going on – she is to be blamed for this war, because she hasn’t stepped up. Historia Reiss has nothing, is nothing, feels nothing.”

You had nothing to say to that – because truly, Historia was your mirror.

Two princesses, running from their thrones, forced to collect names that didn’t hurt to bear.

“You say all of that,” you said, “but aren’t you planning to go and claim the throne, using this war as a distraction? Isn’t that Ymir’s plan?”

Christa looked at Ymir, who looked right back at her.

Unafraid. Unflinching.

Two kinds of monsters – the powerful kind with royal blood in her veins, and the dangerous kind that thirsted for humans, managing to fall in love with each other.

That was more of a tale you’d read.

“I didn’t come here to stop that plan,” you told Ymir. “I came here to encourage it. If you can get an unbiased and good ruler on the throne… It’ll do amazing things for humanity. Historia – you’re bigger than us. Bigger than this school, than this city.”

“Bigger than you?” Ymir asked, snidely.

“I am a princess who ran from a crown that didn’t fit,” you snapped. “But at least I made one for myself that fit much better. Historia hasn’t even attempted to wear it – so how can she say that it does not fit her?”

“Don’t call me that,” the nameless princess said. “I’m not ready for that name, and I never will be.”

“I’m going to tell you about a lesson I had to learn the hard way,” you said, and knelt before her. “I collected names and titles, thinking they would fit me better than the last. But the names will not fit you, because it depends who calls you them. You already have someone who will stay with you no matter the name that you bear. You have always been you – it does not matter what you call yourself.”

Because it did not matter what you called yourself.

Belua, Y/N, Pride.

Names that you had tried on, like clothes, thinking that you could merely take one off and have it cease to exist as you wore another one. But they were not clothes – they were facets of a whole.
They were pieces in a puzzle that built up Y/N L/N in your entirety.

You were a maelstrom.

You were a never-ending combination of all of your experiences, everyone you’d pretended to be, every trait you’d adopted and adapted from all of the people around you. You had Belua’s past, Pride’s present, Y/N’s future.

You had all of that.

And now Christa had to go down that long road of acceptance – but she did not have to do it alone. “You will have me as an ally for as long as I live, one princess to another.” you told her sincerely. “And you also have Ymir, who I believe is the far more foreboding presence that you may need to get those ministers to accept you. Go to Erwin for help; I think he already suspects, which is why he stayed in the city this past week instead of scouting for suitable battlefields and soldiers himself.”

“You would trust a human princess who has a titan at her side?”

Ymir had straightened and had put her weapon back into its sheath. You shot her a smile that was more of a display of teeth than anything else. “You two are on the Seven Deadly Sins. Of course, I trust you.”

“Annie, Bertoldt and Reiner were too, once,” Ymir reminded you.

“I trust them to be nothing but what they are,” you replied. “As I trust everyone. Unfortunately for all of us, I know exactly what you are. And unfortunately for Christa, I know who Historia is and I can’t leave without demanding she take the reins.”

“Fake it until I make it, I suppose,” Christa said, and stood up.

Not Christa, anymore. She arose blank, unfeeling, an untouched slate. She arose not as the girl who brought her friends snacks, not as the girl who trained with herbs and healing items, but as more. For the first time since you’d met her, you didn’t think of her as cute.

No one thinks of a woman who was born to sit on a throne as cute, because they wear danger as they did their crowns – blatant, beautifully, bewitchingly.

Christa had meant what she’d said. Christa was everything that was kindness and sweetness – perhaps to prove to everyone that she had merit in her existence.

Historia Reiss was a dangerous person for her to be, because she did not feel.

You knew that she’d make an extraordinary fit for the titan crown if she was not destined for the human one.

“We still need this battle to take place,” Ymir said. “As a distraction. We need this school to fight the titans so that we can use it as a cover to leave and run to the city; our alibi would be that we were carrying a message to the ministers.”

This was your decision to make. The decision that you’d been fighting.

To send the school with children Y/A years old to war – not merely for the sake of battling the titans, but as a distraction. To pay for their new Queen with their lives, which they wouldn’t even
be aware of.

“The first years are strangely like you,” Ymir said, her voice hard. “How would you have felt, last year, if they’d told you not to go to that final battle?”

“I would have gone anyway,” you sighed, falling straight into her trap, knowingly and willingly. “I will be your distraction.”

You would do exactly that. It was time to show Orion and your mother exactly what beast they’d trained, and just how beasts with loose collars liked to bite. Because Orion was coming; it was already strange that he’d let you go. Perhaps, by now, he’d realized that you actually had to get married in order for him to achieve the throne. You’d read up on that, too. In the extensive library, a week ago. The next in line for the throne, if not you, would be your uncle. You wished you could have seen Orion’s face as he realized that.

That was why he was coming for you now.

You knew it.

You were not afraid.

“Now, excuse me,” you said. “But I believe my darling Orion has sent a messenger onto the school grounds. I’ve already been tardy in greeting them.”

“You know who it is,” Ymir said, even as Historia turned slowly to watch you leave through the window. “Are you ready? Know which face to wear?”

“We’ll see,” you said with a charming wink. “Long live the Queen.”

And you left your mirror and the one you now admired for truly being a titan with humanity restored and flew into the night.

*

“You know, I can’t imagine missing school so much that I’d come back before a battle,” you drawled, stalking past the final trees and back into the clearing, idly throwing your daggers high and catching them with a flick of your wrist.

“And yet, here you are,” a low voice replied. You heard the effort they put into retraining the innate growls and snarls that titans built into their voices, and grinned.

“Hello, Reiner. And Bertoldt, too! It’s a surprise Orion didn’t come to give me the message himself – especially with his favourite dogs here. You two were always so good at panting after him.” Reiner glowered at you, whilst Bertoldt pinched the bridge of his nose. It seemed that you’d strolled right into the middle of a shouting match between the humans you’d left behind and the arriving titans. “Feel free to bow any time, dogs.”

“Belua,” Reiner said, shortly. “How have you not slaughtered them from the inside out by now?”

You looked down your nose as Isabel as she pouted at you. “They are spectacularly annoying, aren’t they?” Sasha snorted in response, but Connie was far too on edge already – glaring at Reiner. “Unfortunately, it just so happens that two opposing sides of a war is caught in the middle of a little tiff my darling Orion and I are having. Marital issues, I’m sure you know.”

“He’s sworn to get you back,” Reiner said. “ Doesn’t sound like you are particularly fighting.”
You stood up straight and cleared your throat. “I do not want to go back to him, or to you, or to being a titan.”

“He said that he let you go for you to be something like a fox in a chicken coop,” Reiner tried, again, to restrain his snarl. It didn’t work; his frustration was creeping through his tenor no matter how hard he tried to stop it. “Said it was his order. Go back to him – come back to us.”

You smiled. “What could you ever offer me, Reiner? Bertoldt?”

“We’re friends,” Bertoldt spoke then, sounding hurt. Knowing him – how strangely quiet he always was, even with the loud attitude that was the norm for titans – it may have even been true, in his mind. “And Annie… You must know how she feels about you. Why Orion hates her being around you so much.”

“Where is Annie?” Isabel replied, her eyes alight with anger as she settled her gaze on anything but Reiner. Farlan gave her a sidelong glance before meeting Reiner’s amused stare. “Surely she would simply love to see us.”

“Orion forbade her from coming to see his promised one,” Reiner said, rolling his eyes. “Jealousy and Orion are two things that go hand in hand.”

You didn’t bother to snarl, or to growl, or to say your next words with any feeling whatsoever. “Is that all you came to tell us? That my darling Orion is a jealous baby?”

“He told us to get you back to him for the fight in two days,” Reiner said, raising a bushy eyebrow. “By force or by peaceful methods, he doesn’t care.”

“You will not take her,” Eren said. “You will not have any of us.”

Reiner laughed, but Eren did not flinch – whether due to his own steel will or the fact that his fingers were clenched at the hem of Jean’s shirt, you could not decide. “Take it easy, titan-boy,” Jean laughed, in the obnoxious way that he always did. Your friends shot exasperated looks at him, but you suspected that only you saw the way that Jean’s hand brushed against Eren’s in a silent reassurance. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you that animals can’t understand you, no matter what you say?”

“You understand a lot of human words for a horse,” Sasha called.

Jean and Eren’s tips of their ears were slowly turning pink. You decided to save them both from further scrutiny. “If you want me,” you told Reiner, “you’ll have to come and get me, I’m afraid.”

“No going over to the titan side this time,” he replied, and you bizarrely believed the regret you heard in his voice. “We’ll destroy you if you march against us.”

“We’ll see,” Mikasa said softly, even as the two titans measured up the fight that all of you would present and seemed to give up. Reiner gave Isabel a sad wave and shot you a wink as he melted back into the dark, Bertoldt not daring to look at any of you before following his partner.

“You wanted to go to war, I suppose;” you said, glancing at Isabel.

She did not look pleased – her face was flushed, and she pulled away from Farlan’s comforting hand. “And you’re going to order the school to fight in two days, I suppose.”

“Two days,” Jean repeated, and stretched his arms above his head. “I think I’m going to go back to the dorms for cake. Want to join?”
“Like a last meal, but with cake,” Connie said, admiringly. “I’m down.”

“I’m coming too,” Isabel said, and tugged at your hand. “Somehow, I don’t think the warden will care about genders mixing in the dorms now. Not when we have only two days to come up with a plan.” You glanced across to Farlan, and he seemed to understand from your eyes that he was the only one in your group that would not partake in the morbid last cake.

“To Levi, then,” he said, and started to walk towards the directions of the stables.

“To Levi,” you agreed, and instead made your way towards cake.
“I don’t think I like war.”

You snorted and looked over at where Jean was sneering around the interior of the tent, the light dim as the sun was setting. “I think you just don’t like camping. It’s only for tonight.”

“If war forces me to reside in a tent for one night, then I don’t like war,” Jean insisted.

You were sat on one of the makeshift seats, looking over a feeble table with a map of the nearby area drawn prettily onto it. Pixis leaned over it, strangely quiet – but it was only the three of you in what Pixis had called the leader’s tent.

It was not as if the rest of the school was far; the noise of them setting up their own tents, preparing their various weapons and horses, talking about different formations… That was soaring high, although you were becoming adept at tuning it out.

This is what the start of war was.

People clinging to any shred of normalcy – students trying to enjoy a camping night whilst trying to forget that it was due to be a battlefield tomorrow, Jean making jokes to try and get others to laugh, you sitting quietly trying to come up with a bigger plan.

All of that was a mask of normalcy to try and cast the threat into shadow.

There was a very real possibility that all of you were going to die tomorrow.

There wouldn’t be an escape for you, this time. Orion had made it clear – there was not a single way you would be accepted if you tried to say that you were a true titan. There was no saving of yourself; there were many in the approaching titan army that would be hunting for you and you alone.

Several minutes passed in silence – at least, silence from within the tent.

Jean broke first.

“Why, exactly, am I here?”

You looked up, watching Pixis carefully. The man did not move, his eyes still fixed firmly on the large, grassy area of the map that would soon become a mass grave. “As opposed to?”

Jean’s brow furrowed. “As opposed to military minds like Mikasa, or Isabel, or even a third year. Y/N, I very much understand why she’s here. Me? No clue.”

He stared at Pixis, waiting for an answer that your headmaster was clearly not going to give. Jean then tried looking at you for a reply, but you could hardly do better than a shrug. “Don’t look at me, I have no idea why you’re here.”

“Always the vote of confidence,” Jean said, throwing his hands behind his head.

You tapped your foot on the ground, glad that the grass muffled most of the sounds. It wouldn’t do to act anxious – you knew exactly why Jean was here. Pixis needed someone to calm him down, which was why he’d chosen your sole opposite.
Isabel would infuriate Pixis if she was here; Mikasa would only serve to push him harshly into a war mindset. But Jean Kirstein? There wasn’t a more level-headed person for miles which paired well with an irritating sense of humour.

No one was better suited to calm Pixis as all of the students patiently waited for one thing, and one thing only.

An army.

That’s what you’d sent Farlan away for – for an army, for Levi, for Erwin. It had been a day, during which Pixis had gathered the entire school and marched them towards the battlefield – the same battlefield as a year ago. No one said that the titans didn’t have a flair for the dramatic, because everyone was well aware that humanity would rise to the occasion.

“There’s no use planning if we don’t know our full numbers,” you murmured, aware that Pixis had not brought you in for help with planning. He had brought you in order to supervise you, to ensure that there was nothing you could do to surprise him. It was fair enough, you supposed. Although now, there were no more tricks you could pull.

Not ones that involved you, anyway. You just had to be the distraction, and though it felt sickening to know that all of your friends had to serve as a distraction alongside you, you knew that if they were aware of the truth, they’d still choose to be here at your side.

It wouldn’t stop them being mad at you for deceiving them, however. But this was not your secret to tell – it was a secret belonging to Historia Reiss, and you refused to be the first to betray her on her path to royalty.

“You know they’re on their way,” Jean said to you, not bothering to keep his voice low. “There’s no need to worry about them.”

You roll your eyes. “As if I’d be worried, Jean.”

“Come on,” Jean said, beckoning loosely at you. “Let’s go and get some of the soup being handed out.”

You spared a glance at Pixis, but it was clear the man was no longer focusing on anything except for his own thoughts. You ducked out of the tent flaps after Jean, pleasantly surprised at the coolness of the night air. None of the students were bothered at the pair of you walking unsteadily away from the leader’s tent, legs unused to your weight after being stood up for so long. “I like the night.”

“Poetic,” Jean replied with disdain, stopping for a moment to look around. The tents of the students were all put up neatly in rows, with small gatherings in the centre of the grassy aisles between them. Comfortable bonfires were being lit, food was being heated and the people were laughing.

It was lovely, but not quite lovely enough to make you forget about war. Or about the bonfires.

“You two,” Connie called, leaning around a tent. “I didn’t expect to see you free from the claws of the headmaster.”

“And we didn’t expect to see you without food in your grasp,” Jean replied, striding towards his friend. “But here we are.”

Connie grimaced, but allowed you and Jean to follow him down the straight lanes to where the majority of your group were gathered. Isabel looked up and pouted grumpily at you, unhappy that
she too hadn’t been invited to Pixis’s tent, but she still fidgeted to the side slightly to make room between her and Sasha.

“Don’t give me that look,” you told her, settling yourself into the space she’d made for you. Jean stayed standing, looking around for someone who didn’t seem to be sat with the rest of your friends. “It’s not my fault that Pixis didn’t call me.”

“That’s not why she’s upset,” Sasha muttered thickly to you, speaking around the mouthful of whatever she’d just shoved into her mouth.

You glanced between the two girls, but now Isabel seemed to be simmering with both of you. You shot a glance around to see if anyone else was paying attention – but there wasn’t a large number of you here.

Connie and Jean were still standing, the latter now looking carefully at the ground now that he’d stopped looking nervously around. Sasha, Isabel and you were seated on the floor, opposite a very quiet Armin.

You often didn’t realize the large number of you in your friendship group until you were part of a far smaller group. How quiet it was without the constant chatter, the different conversations taking place.

You weren’t sure if you missed the larger group or cherished the quieter moments where each person shone through more clearly, more individually than in a team.

“Isabel?” You prompted the red head, nudging her gently with your shoulder.

“You – I don’t know.”

You’d never really heard Isabel stutter so harshly before. “Just tell me. What did I do?”

“You sent Farlan away,” Sasha supplied. You wondered, briefly, if she was merely ignorant of how harshly Isabel blushed in response, or uncaring.

“You sent him alone,” you agreed. “Why would that bother –“

You didn’t dare to finish the sentence as Isabel turned and gave you a blistering glare. “You realize how awfully I’m in love with him, don’t you?” Isabel’s eyes were shining brilliantly, dangerously above the furious reddening of her cheeks. You said nothing, suddenly very aware of the power Isabel Magnolia possessed in her small, boyish form.

After a while, the obvious challenge had died down from Isabel’s eyes, and you felt stable enough to start speaking. “I knew that there was something there,” you said, slowly. “I don’t know what went on in the months I wasn’t here for, though.”

“Nothing officially,” Isabel said, her voice razor sharp. “But if you knew that he and I had something, why didn’t you let me go with him to get Levi? You sent him alone through titan territory – alone! So soon after he tried to basically die.”

You blinked. “I just thought one person would go unnoticed in the titan lands – and he’s not unprotected, he has his skill as a swordsman –“

“You/N,” Sasha quietly warned you, now flicking stones into the fire.

“Next time you want to send him away,” Isabel growled, “you send me with him. Because every
second I’m not with him, I’m not really here. I’m somewhere else, somewhere out there where he is. And right now, he isn’t here when he should damn well be, so I’m left to imagine what’s really happened!”

“I don’t think there will be a next time,” you said. “But I won’t send anyone alone again.”

Isabel huffed something under her breath, but you supposed there wasn’t anything you could do about it now. “Those days where we went to get you from the Underground,” she said, more clearly, “I kept thinking of him. It’s why I didn’t like Olyver at first – looked too much like him. And then we got back, after leaving him alone for so long without information, and he was – he was trying to kill himself. I can’t – I can’t let it happen. Not again.”

That was until Petra appeared at the edges of your vision, sprinting through tents with her hair brushed back into a low ponytail. You snapped to attention, watching as she sprinted straight past you – back towards the leader’s tent.

You made to follow her, Jean and Connie already speeding after her, knowing that Isabel and Sasha would copy you.

Petra’s breakneck speed did not falter until she dove into the leader’s tent, every movement polished. You all staggered to a halt outside, opening the tent so that you all could hear and see Petra and Pixis. You hadn’t seen her for a while – not since the SO squad had left in preparation for Reiner and Bertoldt. But now it struck you that they hadn’t gone to kill the titans that had snuck in with a message that declared war.

They’d gone to track the two back to Orion, back to the titan army.

And if the ruthless expression on Petra’s face was anything to go by, the SO squad had found them.

Pixis didn’t flinch, but he finally moved – his head angled upwards to scan Petra, to mark her straight back, to eye the dirt on her shoes. “News, Ral?”

“They knew you’d send for the army after they’d delivered their message to the students,” she reported, voice cold. “They don’t plan to face the students and soldiers in the same army again – they were going to attack the army first, pick them off and then come to finish the students off here.”

Pixis’s eyes slid cleanly over to watch your own eyes widen.

“And the army?”

“Miles away,” Petra said. “Two hours ride. And blocked from coming here by a titan army that will attack any minute now.”

Isabel’s hand found itself in your own – and you only knew it was hers by the furious way it was shaking. Or perhaps that was your own hand, descending into a slight panic.

‘Slight’ panic. As if your very blood wasn’t suddenly sinking to your feet. You’d sent Farlan away – you’d beckoned Levi and Erwin into a war that they were going to face alone, might already be facing if you trusted Petra’s judgement.

And you did.

Her squad were not with her – she’d left them behind to get help. To get you.
“Tell the brats to get their weapons and ride out,” Pixis said, pleasantly. He was at ease, now, you realized. Pixis was a man who hated the ball in the other man’s court. He hated the fact that they were bringing a fight to him, where he was forced to take up the defensive.

Pixis was an assassin; to attack was his profession, was his specialty.

Petra turned on her heel and patted Isabel on the shoulder, unsurprised that you’d all followed her. “I’ll give the order.”

You turned and found Isabel biting her lip. An apology sprung to your own – you’d sent Farlan to war. You’d sent him to danger without a second thought.

“Don’t say sorry,” Isabel interrupted you. “Not for sending him to war. We wanted to be sent. But what you should apologise for is sending him alone.”

“I’m sorry,” you said, and meant it.

*

You were riding Skira in a gallop mere minutes later.

It was not the fastest gallop that your mare could manage – far from it. But this was not you storming in on your own – this was you, galloping alongside hundreds of other students on horses. No one stood out; you were a unit, together.

That meant you had to keep the pace.

Mikasa was at your side – the rest of the team lost among the students, only concerned about one thing.

No longer were they waiting for an army.

You were the army.

“Ready?” Mikasa asked.

You’d been ready for most of your life for this moment – to truly go against the titans, to wipe them from the face of the world in a battle where the sun shone on humanity.

But now it was night, and the human army was split into two.

“Not at all,” you said.

*

The sounds of a battle reached you before the sight did.

You’d been warned in advance before the students reached the battlefield where the army were defending themselves against an unexpected attack – not by a messenger, or by Pixis shouting instructions over the sounds of an uncountable number of hooves hitting the ground, but by the horizon.

It was brightening.

Not with the sun rising, for the sun did not rise in the direction of north – but by fire.
The titans were not going to let any human from that army escape and had set a giant fire forming a barricade between the humans and the city with its safe walls. The only way for the humans to leave was through the titans.

There was nothing you could say as the students merely started shifting themselves around whilst their horses still ran, getting themselves into a spear-headed position. The titans would see you coming, there was nothing you could do about that – but they hadn’t prepared for you.

The yells of the skirmish on both sides were never-ending, but that did not stop the run of the horses.

You were struck by the realization that you truly did not like Assassination Academy. You’d longed to go back for so long and wear the ties and the uniform – but it no longer was the symbol of freedom that had taken a hold on your heart.

You’d wanted the people, but not the situation that had brought you together.

The titans were getting closer – and a few of them were turning around, throwing up spears, screaming orders to the others closest to them. You drew your sword, a fine thing given to you by Pixis before riding out from the school.

There were no pretty jewels in the handle – your daggers were secured at their sheaths on your thighs, their own jewels hidden – but you didn’t need it to look pretty. You needed it to look cunning, cruel, powerful.

The serrated edge of the blade performed that job immediately and ruthlessly.

And on the handle, just where your thumb was pressed against the metal of the handle, a small carving could be felt – too small to be seen properly in the darkness – but you knew perfectly what it was. Perhaps you’d get the drawing tattooed over the titan brand on your collarbone if you lived long enough to consider it further.

The wings of freedom beneath your fingers and the undying will to win what it symbolised burned on.

And the wave of students hit the titans with a sickening thud.

You knocked a spear aside and leaned over in the saddle to slice up the titan’s arm – because that’s what the first wave did. Immobilise, disarm, distract. The second wave of students would be the ones to take the kills, to defend what havoc the first wave brought upon their enemy.

Already, bodies were falling from horses.

The sounds were blurring in your ears.

You tried not to let it falter your movements as you swung your sword, aiming for limbs, chancing swipes at any unprotected necks or heads.

The fact that titans were briefly suffering did not falter your movements.

But it did falter your horse.

Skira screamed for a reason you were too distracted by the destruction around you to notice, and you were thrown from the saddle. It was all you could do to clutch the sword to your chest and curve your body around it, not allowing the blade to cause any injury to you.
As soon as you’d stopped rolling, you were back on your feet.

You didn’t dare look around for Skira, for your beloved horse – couldn’t. Titans were swarming to meet the challenge of students, blocking all of your sight apart from the immediate radius of where your sword could reach.

So instead of searching, you began cutting your way through to where you’d tumbled from the saddle, narrowly avoiding oncoming horses. Abandoning that idea as soon as a fallen titan made use of her last few moments to successfully slice the back of your thigh, you ensured that the blood running down the back of your leg was the last blood the titan would draw from a human again.

Students still cantered forwards in their waves, swords and whips now drawn instead of the majority of spears clutched by the first wave. You started running in the same direction, using a particularly bulky horse to act as a shield as you pushed on, on, on.

“Pride!”

You couldn’t quite explain how you managed to hear Isabel’s shriek over the sounds of humans and titans dying, but you did. You swung around with your arm already held upwards with your fingers splayed. Isabel rode her horse past, swinging you up behind her.

You grabbed at her saddle even as you swung over to slap a sword away from the horse cantering next to you.

There was no time for greetings.

Time was liquid. Time was blood being spilled. Time was the hurt from numerous slices you’d already received.

And then Isabel was pushing herself from the saddle and flying to Farlan, dodging the titans with pure speed, leaving you to hiss and grab at the reigns of the massive horse.

“Isabel Magnolia,” Farlan laughed, not noticing even as you rode Strawberry around to behead a titan coming at him, “you are a gemstone. You are as hard and as brilliant as diamonds, as mesmerising and bewitching as emeralds.”

Isabel turned to reply but instead screamed as a titan leaped at her and tore at her shoulder.

Your heart stopped, but Farlan was already there – swiping at its neck, sending blood spraying. Isabel flexed her shoulder, giving him a cheeky smile that had relief coursing through your lungs. If she could move it, it was going to be alright.

“I wonder why Levi doesn’t ever say stuff like that to me,” you shouted, slipping from the saddle and handing the reigns over to Farlan who did not hesitate to tiredly heave himself onto the horse.

“That’s because,” a breathless voice snarled, “you are nothing like a gemstone.”

A moment ago, you’d been cursing Isabel for forgetting herself so much in the face of Farlan that she’d gotten herself injured. But that didn’t matter as you turned to see Levi kick the corpse of a titan he’d just stabbed through the stomach away, bruises decorating his exposed arms and blood splattered over his face.

You could’ve been stabbed in that moment, and you wouldn’t have known it.

“You’re here,” you whispered, and felt your throat collapse in relief. You staggered over to him,
running your eyes over his frame to check if there were any serious injuries.

“I saw my idiot sister get attacked from over there,” Levi whispered back, his arm bringing you close to his side even with his twin swords drawn. He kissed your temple, and you clenched your eyes shut against the tears of insane relief. You composed yourself immediately, snapping open your eyes and rolling your posture back to something that wasn’t a panicked stoop.

“After the battle?” Levi posed, shooting a look of disgust at the dirt on his hands.

“After the battle,” you agreed.

And you dove into your enemies as you always did, with your weapons drawn and teeth bared.

Together.
War was so entirely messy that you almost understood Levi’s obsession with cleanliness.

But it wasn’t just the stickiness of the blood on your face, or the sweat plastering itself to your clothes, or the mud that was quickly forming.

It was the mess of information that was quickly becoming your most hated thing – wondering where your friends were, wondering who had been hurt. You understood, glaringly, your weakness; you were an excellent assassin and could hold your own in a fight with ease. But in war, where there was no duel or collection of information or the opportunity to give your enemy one minute of attacking time so that you could glean their weaknesses… You were at a loss. The best you could do was keep your sword moving, keep your enemy’s head rolling.

Levi and you had branched out, standing the ground between the titans and the wall of flame. You wouldn’t allow the titans to push you back – but even as you had that thought, a titan dove headfirst at you, and you both tumbled to the dirt.

You locked your ankles around their waist and quickly abandoned the sword, going straight for the daggers at your thighs. Their handles were slippery with blood – whether yours or your enemies, you did not know – but that didn’t stop you from getting a solid handle on them and plunging them deep into your attacker’s stomach and ripping upwards, up through skin and muscle and organ.

Whilst you’d been going for your daggers, the titan had been tearing into your shoulder with brass knuckles so that your entire left arm was slowly turning numb – but once you’d tossed the body aside and scrambled to your feet, you merely armed yourself with your sword in your right hand and continued.

Messy – constant death.

“Y/N,” Levi shouted, ducking around a titan so that he could yell cleanly. “Look south!”

You looked south.

The flames at your back did well to light the battlefield before you – but not enough that you could immediately see what Levi had wanted you to. It took a few solid seconds until you spotted a familiar sword arcing through some students, their human bodies crumbling into blood and splintered bone.

Orion had come to play, and his game was death.

For the first time, you didn’t want to walk straight up and fight. Fear was lacing itself into your fingers – and pain. Pain was in every breathe you took, rattling inside your lungs. But you still stumbled forwards, joining Levi in the act of carving yourself a path towards your promised partner, the iron ring at your finger strangely hot. Or was it cold? It was getting harder to tell.

You tripped over more than one body on your way to face Orion and forbade yourself from looking at their faces to evaluate whether they were friend or foe or if you recognised them. Levi stormed ahead – not pausing to help you rise, not bothering to check his back.
You did that for him, deflecting the titans to other fighters, keeping the ones you couldn’t kill far away from Levi’s prowl towards Orion. You’d never seen Levi in serious action before – but you doubted he was normally like this; unguarded, hardly cautious.

Naturally, his talent at killing things was staggeringly obvious, but the man was tired.

He’d already been fighting for an age before you’d gotten to him, although you’d lost track of time since your horse had taken a tumble. But still he stepped forwards, his gear useless with the lack of trees or buildings, but his twin swords unstoppable.

Orion laughed as he saw Levi approach.

He flung out a clawed hand, sweeping titans away so that they formed a sickening circle around the pair – and you. They parted for you, silently watching to see what you’d do. “Even if you manage to kill me,” Orion shouted, his onyx eyes alight as he settled them on Levi, “my army surrounding us will fall onto you and tear you apart.”

It was true – you and Levi could take on titans with relative ease. But more than ten titans falling onto you both at the same time? Impossible. Your odds in that scenario didn’t exist.

“But when I kill you,” Levi told him, “there’s nothing stopping me from shredding their bones to throw at your corpse.”

Orion saw you, then. His eyes widened, and the flame at your back performed a cruel trick that made his eyes spark and flicker with something that could have been delight, could have been something human. “Belua,” he said, the way he sighed the word making your heart twist. It almost sounded like worship, the way he said the beast’s name. But unfortunately for him, you knew that there was no coming back from being that crippled in the mind.

Your Orion had died long ago – and even if he was still there, somewhere, trapped in his titan’s body... You knew he’d be begging for you to kill him, to end him, to end his entrapment with your daggers.

The screams of your people dying around you drew you back into your present situation, and you felt it – the blood lust awakening, sleek, a powerful thing.

For the first time, you didn’t fight it.

“He’s yours, for now,” you told Levi, who looked wickedly delighted at your statement. Because it would make Orion furious, you leaned forwards and pressed your lips quickly to Levi’s cheek, closing your eyes for a heartbeat. And then the two of you split up, entering different kinds of carnage.

Him, into a makeshift duel where you should have shone, a circle of titans protecting him from any true protection that could have come to save him.

You, into a war where Levi had proved time and time again was his domain and his area of expertise, flame and blood only helping your vision descend into red.

Blood lust was a titan trait. It was something you’d fought every single time it had attempted to rise in your gut, fearing its disastrous effect. You’d locked Belua away in your mind, fearing her effect, fearing her lack of emotion – only allowing her to take over for the moments where you truly had no care if your attackers were left alive or dead.

But that was if you permitted her to take over.
It was glaringly simple, what you had to do.

Blood lust was a titan trait, and that was not a bad thing, because you were a titan.

You were both a titan and a human, a catastrophic combination of the two. You were Belua, and Y/N, and Pride.

There was no longer any aspect of yourself that you were afraid of. No facet of your personality that was not exactly how it was meant to be, or that you’d apologize for. All of the names you’d collected had built you, had formed you, had hewn you from the stone of the world.

You were Y/N L/N, and you would be nothing but proud of what you were.

You unshackled yourself in your mind, Belua swelling and forming and binding herself to you. You would have once panicked, would have locked her back, would have screamed at her whilst baring teeth of iron. But it did not matter. You were still Y/N L/N, and now – so was she.

You set yourself free.

The white dagger now in your other hand to the sword gripped in your dominant one, you went where your feet desired – straight into the thicket of screams, tearing through bodies that did not bear the symbol of freedom. Mikasa did not smile as she saw you slicing through her attackers; she instead joined you, keeping herself back as though she did not recognise you.

Perhaps she couldn’t.

You were no longer a whirlwind of death, but instead something worse and something far more powerful.

The titans that fell at your feet proved it – you blocked their blows with your sword, diving underneath to then slice north with your dagger. Using the dying titans’ bodies as shields, you threw false blows that had titans falling for the feints and then falling because you’d already dodged around to kill them.

They were dead before they hit the ground, and you knew it was a kind death.

Mikasa killed the titans that had clocked you and had planned to avoid fighting you head on, sending them crumpling to the ground. She was fierce flame, nimbly hopping from titan to titan as she saw fit. But she kept herself close to you, warily.

She couldn’t fight alongside you anymore, for you were no longer the twin to her fighting style – but it was that thought that momentarily halted you. Mikasa stepped forwards, hacking her swords into some poor beast’s shoulders. You allowed her to go forwards, now looking at her carefully.

That day that you’d been threatened by the humans, you and she had fought perfectly together, despite never doing so before. Truly twins, truly excellent. You’d had a twin fighter once – and his fighting style was precisely the same as Mikasa Ackerman’s. No wonder you had fought so brilliantly at her side.

Orion, son to Kuchel.

You touched understanding before it promptly hit you.

Orion Ackerman.
That was his name – because Kuchel Ackerman had been his mother. Not just his mother – but Levi’s. Kenny had told you about her, and you’d remembered the name of the titan you’d beaten only because he’d said her name, not knowing that you’d already met her.

You’d left Levi fighting his brother.

You became aware of the wounds decorating your body – your left leg trembling, your hand steadily dripping blood that had trickled down from a wound on your shoulder, your back sore. But you still turned back to that circle of titans where you knew the two Ackermans were fighting.

Mikasa cried a warning.

Your attention was brought sharply back to yourself, but the sword that you began to slice in a circle did nothing as a blade found itself wedged in your side, just below your ribs. You cried out – you couldn’t help it. The pain speared itself through your body, the cold ice of the weapon warming quickly because of the wet heat of your blood drenching it.

Mikasa was there, cutting the titan away, her hand reaching out to you as if you’d collapse.

Your body wanted to collapse – was ready to shut down.

You ignored both as you began to walk steadily towards the two Ackermans. You stabbed the bodies of titans on the ground if they moved, trusting that Mikasa was keeping any onslaught away from your back. She fought silently, but the titans facing her did not.

Their dying sounds were the only constant as your body realized that you weren’t going to allow it to stop.

The circle of titans surrounding Levi and Orion did not part for you as they had done the first time – unsurprised or uncaring that you’d come back. “Move,” you told them, grimly, using the voice of a Princess.

They did not move.

“Just one person against us?” They instead shouted, guffawing to each other. “Orion said not to kill her, but he’s busy.”

“I thought you were going to stay out of trouble,” Mikasa grumbled, panting behind you as she waved awkwardly at someone far off. “Now we have to – to keep fighting.”

“Totally unexpected move,” Isabel replied, yelling from the back of her horse and clutching tightly to Farlan’s waist with the arm that wasn’t wielding the rapier. “She’s doing something stupid!”

“I hate running and you just made me run,” Jean panted, leaping his way over a few corpses to find his way to you.

A few students that you didn’t know had followed Jean, their faces smudged with tears or sweat or blood. You rolled your working shoulder back, not giving the titans any warning as you stabbed one of them in the throat. Isabel laughed in shock as she, too, began circling the group on her horse and attacked in neat swoops, Farlan expertly riding Strawberry around.

Mikasa didn’t need prompting to protect the titans prompt resurgence forwards, diving between the beasts and the students.

The titans did not go quietly.
Both Isabel and Strawberry screamed as one of the titans dove in front of the huge mare, spearing the horse in the chest. Farlan did not hesitate to shove Isabel from the saddle, falling to the ground and yelling as his leg was crushed by the dying horse’s weight. Isabel stood over them both, trying to buy Farlan time to free himself as she mourned the loss of her beloved horse.

You understood the sorrow but were too concerned with the sight in front of you.

Even without the circle of titans protecting them from outside interruptions, Orion and Levi insisted on facing each other without sacrificing their attention to anything else.

They did not look like brothers.

“You think she’ll love you,” Orion snarled, diving to the left in an attempt to knock Levi’s sword from his hands. “She’ll love no one but herself.”

“If she loves herself then at least we have loving her in common,” Levi replied, stepping briefly to the side – an exhausted move. If he were in top form, you knew, he would’ve tried to turn that manoeuvre around onto Orion, would’ve tried to disarm your father’s sword from his grip. Orion did not press Levi’s dodge – because he too, was tired.

“She loved me,” Orion spat. “You weren’t there, you didn’t see.”

“I think she has an Ackerman kink,” Levi spat back with equal temper. “Don’t take it personally. She’d marry Mikasa any day.”

“Mikasa,” Orion repeated. “I thought she looked familiar – like our mother.”

Levi did not allow himself to be distracted and continued slashing at Orion’s torso, only to be blocked by that magnificent sword. “You knew?”

“I watched over Y/N when she slept,” Orion said. “She said your name – and mine. She whispered the word Ackerman more times than I could count – and I knew for a fact she didn’t know my last name. I knew it had to have been yours.”

Levi grinned savagely as he brought his swords down ruthlessly towards Orion’s head, only to be swiped effortlessly away. “Jealous, brat?”

Orion’s answering smile was terrifying. “You have no idea. I am the one she’s engaged to, the one she said yes to; I am the one who fought for her return to us, the one who grew up with her. I’m the one that knows her.”

“What is her favourite colour?”

Orion tried not to freeze at the odd question, and he paid for it as Levi took advantage of his lowered guard and sliced at his knees. He roared in pain and stabbed downwards on instinct, slicing a narrow cut onto Levi’s shoulder before the shorter Ackerman could get out of Orion’s sword’s range. “Her favourite colour? Are you insane?”

“Not insane, just in love,” Levi simply said, grimacing as he checked his shoulder. “Die sooner, you bastard.”

“She. Is. Still. Wearing. My. Ring!” Orion said, swiping at Levi with his sword once for every word. Levi grunted with the effort of parrying each blow but managed to hold his ground. “What does that tell you?”
What happened next seemed to take place in slow motion – and you saw it all.

Levi’s eyes widened just a fraction, his heel planting but sliding in the mud.

Orion was already moving, his sword aimed for Levi’s throat – his chest twisting towards you, unprotected, his smile victorious as he went in to claim the killing blow.

And then you saw his eyes wince in shock and felt his surprised breath on your cheek.

It was only possible to feel it because of how close, suddenly, you were.

But your white jewelled dagger had been sunk into his chest up to its leather and amber hilt, and his sword hadn’t connected to Levi.

It hadn’t torn through Levi – that fact was the first to ring through your mind.

The next was the pain.

Pain that was so great that you couldn’t say a thing – only crumple against Orion, forbidding your dagger from coming out of his chest until he drew his last breath.

He dropped the hilt of his sword and tore the dagger out of his torso, staring at the blood spurting from his chest in time with his heartbeat. He then stared at his sword that he’d let go of but hadn’t moved from its position.

Because it was impaling you through your side.

You both sunk to your knees in front of each other – you, because your knees were shaking, and feet were turning numb. Him, because he was a dead thing walking and knew it.

Orion and you simply looked at each other, and you understood. You were never meant to survive in this world, a hybrid of human and titan. You and Orion were twins in soul; of course, you’d die together.

And then his body was kicked away from yours, and you were swept into Levi’s arms. He brushed your face, sinking into the mud and dirt as he cradled you against his own body. It took you a moment to understand the words that his lips were forming as he shook. “You stupid, stupid, stupid brat –”

You smiled at the sound of his voice. You were never meant to survive this world, but he had made it worth living. “Levi.”

“Don’t talk,” he said, his voice going fast and high. “Don’t talk, you’re going to be fine, this is fine, I’ve seen worse –“

“Levi.”
“Don’t you talk, you’re not allowed to leave, OPEN YOUR EYES!”

You hadn’t realized that they’d slipped closed – blackness was creeping in, making the fact that you had closed your eyes irrelevant. You reached a hand upwards, smiling as it found the warmth of Levi’s body above yours. At some point, he’d gathered you into his lap – must have done, since his torso was leaning over yours.

As if he could somehow protect you from the death that was coming for you.

“Levi.”

He ignored your plea, your breath of a word. His hands were fluttering birds as they brushed hair away from your face, stroking every inch of skin that he could, holding you so tightly as if his will alone could keep you tethered to this world.

“What happened to thinking one more? What happened to that swagger, that fire to never give up?”

“It’s still there,” you whispered, feeling fire on your face and realizing that their source was your own tears. “But there’s no need for me to stay here anymore. The titans are mostly gone now.”

It was true; the only reason that you had been permitted to watch Levi and Orion’s fight was because the humans were winning. The titans would soon be all gone, especially with Orion downed. What use was thinking one more if there were no more? You’d done exactly as you’d promised to do – both versions of you were at peace. All that hurt was the weeping of the man that you were going to leave behind.

Each breath of his were laboured, were fast, were fleeting. “If you die here,” he said, in that panting voice of desperation, “then I’ll die here too.”

Your eyes snapped open at that, and you growled – ignoring the way that blood was lathering your chest, your shoulder, your neck. “If you die,” you murmured, well aware that he could hear you, “then I’ll never forgive you. Don’t you dare insult me by throwing away what I’ve sacrificed to get humanity to this stage. Don’t you… Dare…”

Levi threw his head back to the sky and roared. When he looked back down at you, his own tears splattered onto your cheeks. You weren’t sure of when, exactly, his words started to float their descent towards your ears. They had begun to blur into each other, leaving only sentences that broke your heart.

“Don’t leave me.”

“Don’t go where I can’t follow.”

“It was you and me, from the beginning. It was always going to be you – as if there was a choice. It’s always been you and me. Light and dark, sky and ground, water and fire – Y/N and Levi. Remember?”

“Don’t leave me on my own.”

“Please stay, stay and live, we could go and get food, I could take you on dates, I could let you annoy me, I’d marry you in front of a crowd.”

His forehead touched yours. In that moment, there was indeed only you two.

You and Levi. A force of nature, a calamity, a storm, an empire, a pair.

“Levi?” You rasped, knowing that you were slipping.

“Y/N, Y/N, Y/N –“ He was chanting your name as if it were a prayer. On his lips, it sounded like the name of a goddess.

“I love you. Thank you.”

Hopefully he would know what you were thanking him for – for this life, for the people he brought into it, for Isabel, for Farlan, for Jean and Eren and the Seven Deadly Sins, for the hope he gave you, for the time that he’d given you, for the million smiles and shared breaths, for the blistering and cooling rage of the love you felt underneath your skin, for the

No one talks about how threatening silence can be.

No one talks about how captivating the darkness can be.

Perhaps because the only ones who truly know how threatening and captivating the silence and darkness of death is, are just that.

Dead.

Chapter End Notes

... I am... so sorry?

this is not the end of the story though - next chapter will be up soon!
The Moment

The woman knew the moment that the girl’s heart stopped beating.

Knew it, for the man went frozen, the girl’s name dying on his lips. Knew it because the fiery red-haired girl nearby shrieked a wordless cry as she looked over, because the brown-haired male crawling towards them went pale not from blood loss, but from fear.

Knew it because her heart screamed inside her chest, so loudly that she wondered idly if anyone could hear it.
“Move, move, move!”

Isabel didn’t care that she was blunt, that she was shoving past people as fast as she could, that she was crushing another girl’s hand as she practically dragged her through the tide of people. Now that titans were fleeing, humans were wondering what to do – those that could still move freely were hunting the titans, and those that were injured watched over their peers.

And the rest were gathering around the body that used to be Y/N L/N – some heads ducked in prayers, some eyes filled with tears, some mouths twisted into cries. Her death was not a mortal one; the reactions of those around her confirmed it.

Truly a Princess among Humans.

That’s what Isabel would have named the painting of the scene before her – if she dared to live long enough to draw it. It was truly ironic that she’d been struggling to draw and channel her art since Y/N had left, only to return when there wasn’t even the slightest chance of her coming back.

Isabel banned that thought from her head; after all, her blood was still singing a battle song in her veins.

Finally, finally, they broke through the unspoken line of people gathering around the man and girl on the ground, both coated in blood.

In Y/N’s blood.

“Get away from her,” Isabel said, her free hand forming a fist. Levi, still cradling the body, looked up – his eyes as dead as the girl – and didn’t bother to shield as she punched his shoulder with enough force that her knuckles crunched in a sickening harmony. He fell back, the girl’s body limply falling to Isabel’s feet, and Isabel didn’t let herself look again.

But Petra Ral dropped to her knees in front of the body and began her work, not a single movement wasted. Isabel hesitated once – only once – before stepping away from the pair of girls she’d come to admire and love so much and throwing up into the dirt. Her ears were roaring, stomach reeling – she could not accept this.

She wouldn’t accept the death of her sister in soul.

Never.

Distantly, she could hear Petra spit orders, fighting as hard as she could to bring Y/N back.

That was all Isabel had said to her before dragging her through the crowd of people watching a destroyed man roar at the loss of the Princess, of the brilliant girl, of the person that they’d all come to trust irrevocably.

“Bring her back.”

A brown-haired male choked nearby, and Isabel only heard it because a slice of anger speared
itself through the wailing in her ears. She lifted her head, wiping her mouth onto her sleeve, and set her eyes on him.

He didn’t have long to live – Y/N had stabbed him in the chest. From the way he was curled on the floor, any fool could look and know he was a dead man walking. But Isabel looked at him and saw not the brown curls that hinted towards a childish demeanour, nor the brown eyes that held nothing but fear for his fate.

No.

Isabel Magnolia looked at the thing that had stabbed her sister in the chest and saw only that scar on the back of his neck, the way that his teeth were sharpened and that damned iron ring on his finger.

And she knew that the green jewels in her eyes had become little more than blades of ice as she stood up, drew her rapier and stalked over to where he was lying on the ground, staining the earth with his blood. He looked at her as she knelt by his head, not stupid enough to be within swiping distance.

The fear in his shifted – not from an unknown thing, this time. He was terrified – of her.

As he should be. Isabel was not a mere human, a girl in need of saving. She was not a girl cowed by loss or depressed of death. He looked at her and saw that this girl in front of him was not that at all.

Isabel Magnolia was a tigress given a human skin, and she was going to tear him apart.

She leaned closer, ignoring the way that her core tightened in nausea, focusing entirely on the creature in the dust at her feet. She set her rapier under his chin, forcing him to look up at her and know that there was nothing that he could do to stop her wrath.

She felt another presence at her back before Orion’s eyes went to something beyond her shoulder. “Hello, pretty human thing,” he rasped, his eyes alight. Isabel could almost see Mikasa’s mouth tighten in displeasure, despite the fact that her eyes were set entirely on the way that Orion’s eyes began lining with silver.

“Hei, Prince,” Mikasa answered, coming to stand on Isabel’s right. “You look a little worse for wear.”

Orion chuckled weakly, wincing as his stomach probably convulsed in pain. “That – comes when you – fight the wrong person.” He paused, the effort of speaking weighing on him. “Is she - dead?”

Mikasa knelt, her face a few inches from his. Isabel pressed the rapier harsher into his throat, daring him to make one wrong move towards the raven-haired beauty. “You spared my life, and Eren’s. You let us go that day, when we came to retrieve Y/N – without a fight, without a cost. Why.”

It was not a question – only a demand.

Isabel did not expect that someone else would answer it.

“Because I told him to.”

Isabel froze as a woman just appeared on her right, not three meters from them. Orion slumped, the movement making the blood pulse faster from the wound in his chest. He was going to bleed out –
they all knew it. Isabel took a breath in, tightening her fingers around the handle of her rapier. His death would be hers.

The strange woman came closer, placing her hand on Isabel’s elbow. Panic flared as Isabel’s eyes went wide, wanting to take Orion’s throat out, wanting to get that woman away – but Mikasa merely stood up with a snarl, her own blades flashing up.

The woman just laughed a broken, jerking laugh and took a mere step backwards, crouching for a moment to pick up the sword that Petra had removed from Y/N’s side. Isabel withdrew her rapier, allowing Orion’s head to relax into the grass, instead focusing its point on the newer threat. Her dress was stunning – green and lined with gold, but Isabel could just about see the hints of trousers being worn underneath the voluptuous skirts.

Isabel knew this woman.

Knew her for the power that layered her movements, for the hints of her daughter’s face within her facial structure, for the poise that she carried herself with.

Y/N’s mother, Queen of Titans, had finally come to play.

***

Ignorance.

It had always been the Queen of Titan’s hindrance. It had shackled her from the moment her own father had looked at her after she’d been born and declared that she be kept unaware. She’d been raised to be an idle, pleasant to look at, trophy that had been arranged to marry a strong male from another family even before they knew his name.

F/N and M/N. M/N had known that she didn’t matter. Her crown, her role in the kingdom – it went to him immediately. He was the King – and her only job was to keep him in check, to control his rage, to give him an heir that could survive.

They were wed on her (Y/A minus one year) birthday – the night that she should have gone through the operation. Age didn’t matter in the titan world – the sooner they were one, the sooner the realm would be stable. But the entire community was so absorbed by the bonding, by the fact that a lovely princess and a strong titan would bring their monstrous world to prosperity, that they forgot about the simplest thing.

Ignorance.

It had been the Queen of Titan’s salvation, when she’d lied on her bed on that birthday, weeping after the ordeal of the day and the bite of metal around her finger, and realized that she was very much still human.

The titans had crowned their Queen, not realizing that they’d never actually made her into the same thing that they all were. She was surrounded by foxes on every side – had they realized that she was not what they were, she’d have been devoured and destroyed before she could have blinked.

So she used what weapons she had.

Ignorance.

It had been the Queen of Titan’s weapon; she used it to cloak her presence, so much so that she
became used to being a monster, being cruel, hating her life. Until a day came, and she was truly tested.

She had a daughter. A daughter with bright, laughing eyes and such little fingers. A baby girl with a wisp of H/C hair curled on her skull, a girl who gurgled with every breath. A girl that symbolised life and everything that was human and good.

M/N had never loved anything so much.

It made her whole and then shattered her into pieces. This girl that she adored so dearly could wreck her weapon, her salvation, her hindrance. If the girl knew her secret, knew that her mother loved her as nothing had ever been loved before, she could get them both killed.

So, she used the very weapon of ignorance on herself. She did everything that she could to make the girl not love her, to make the girl hate her, to make her resent the love that she held for her mother in any capacity.

The girl had no idea that there was someone in the castle that would look out to her window every night and bask in the darkness, loving her so deeply that it was the only thing that reminded her of her humanity. The girl grew up, beautiful and fast and strong, having no idea that every time she looked to her mother sitting on that throne with dislike and fear in those E/C eyes, it broke her heart.

The girl had no idea that on her birthday, when that Leonhardt doctor was about to make her into the monster that should have been inside M/N, that bonfire didn’t go out due to pure coincidence.

No one suspected the high, proud Queen of putting it out. Ignorance did not make the flashiest weapon, M/N knew – but it was better than nothing. And as her daughter fled, as M/N had gambled she would, the Queen knew that she’d borne another weapon. Y/N would destroy this world and create the next – and she was M/N’s weapon, her salvation, her one hope, her adoration embodied.

And so when that girl’s chest had stopped rising, in the arms of that raven-haired male that roared her name with such agony behind it, the Queen of Titans cracked.

M/N L/N stepped towards the cause of her beloved, adored daughter’s death. And instead of ignorance, she wielded the very sword that had killed Y/N L/N and got ready to draw blood.

***

“You told this beast to let Y/N go if he ever caught her being rescued?” Isabel couldn’t bring herself to believe it – the Queen of Titans, standing before her with the look of something broken in her eyes.

“Naturally,” the Queen said. “I trusted that the boy who’d given her up would come for her. I knew that one day, the humans tracking us would take my daughter,” she said, and her eyes were alive. Not with the insanity that Isabel had once seen, but with genuine pain and human feeling. “I ordered Orion to let that happen, if it one day would. The boy was fool enough to think that there was a bigger plan, a greater plot.”

Orion let out a pained gasp. He’d expected Y/N’s betrayal – perhaps knowing the girl was too wild, too spirited, too strong to be anything but what she truly was – a warrior. But his Queen, the one thing keeping him from his promised throne?

Never.
The Queen of Titans, it seemed, knew how to play a long-lasting game.

Isabel decided, quite suddenly, that she very much liked Y/N’s mother, despite the growing panic in her stomach and lungs that was whispering that perhaps soon, the Titan Queen would be the only thing left of the girl that had been Y/N L/N.

“You would – would betray your own?”

The Titan Queen looked truly pitying as she sneered down at Orion. “My own has only ever meant my daughter, and you are the one that took her from me. I would think twice before allowing your vile thoughts free, scum.” Orion rasped something that Isabel missed, but the Queen very much heard. She tipped back her head to laugh – making Isabel grab at Mikasa’s hand in a sudden rush of weakness. Her daughter was so intricately layered into her own movements and features that it was not possible to separate the two. “My husband? You think that thing had the capacity to match me? I sent him after my daughter when she ran from her titan ritual whilst he was without a weapon, knowing he wouldn’t come back, knowing it would scare my daughter from returning too hastily. Do not make the mistake of thinking of me as merciful.”

The Titan Queen leaned forwards, just as Isabel had done, and levered her husband’s sword under Orion’s chin.

“I’m glad for one thing.” Orion mouthed, the faintest words escaping from his dying lips. “I destroyed her. That girl everyone loved, that I loved. It was me who managed it.”

The Titan Queen laughed, even as her eyes wandered over to where the body of her daughter – The Human Princess – lay, dead. “You did not destroy her. You never possessed that amount of power.”

“But she was broken,” Orion whispered, a dry rasp.

“She was something of a God trapped in a human body,” the Queen said. “All you broke were her restraints; for the fact you freed her, I thank you. But for the other incident,” she continued, and slowly drew the blade across Orion’s throat, “I will end you, and curse you with the fact that you will suffer in the next life.”

Isabel watched Orion’s blood seep into the dirt around him and was shocked how red it was. A monster’s blood did not deserve to be that red, that bright. “He wasn’t always a monster,” Mikasa said, in Isabel’s ear. “Levi said he was an Ackerman, once.”

“Ackermans are just another kind of monster,” Isabel replied, honestly. “All he had to do was transition.”

There was something about Y/N and Ackermans. She’d managed to get each of them around her fingers, had forced each of them to begrudgingly love and admire her.

And now one of them was dead, another was helping Isabel to her feet, and the other had eyes that were just as dead as the first. Isabel marvelled at the fact that Levi and Orion looked like brothers.

But where Levi Ackerman was getting up and sprinting as fast as he could away from the body of Y/N, hurling himself at the retreating titans, Orion Ackerman was dead.

And Y/N, suddenly gasping air under Petra’s desperately shaking fingers, was not.
;) now go read the mother’s scene from The Human Princess or the prologue again, and see if it makes sense :P

(i love u lot very much ok I just rlly like dramatic reveals about the title not being who you’d expect... also Y/N is now breathing!!!! yay!!!)
The Regrets

You had been weightless, and it had felt clean.

But now the weight of *being* pressed on you, thickly, and you gasped for air.

Isabel was already there, kneeling on the other side of your body to where Petra was still ordering her team of medics around your limbs. “Your heart *stopped,*” Isabel sobbed, clutching her hands together in the middle of her chest as if she was afraid her own heart would leap from her chest. You sent her a thin, wavering smile as you contemplated the roaring ache in your shoulder, the tiredness that had settled itself into your bones and further still. “You were *dead.*”

You couldn’t move from your position in the dirt. Breathing sent flares of pain through to your very fingers, sent your eyes clenching closed. Distantly, you were aware of someone rubbing your toes and feet, struggling to bring back the warmth that had fled from your body the moment that you hadn’t been there anymore.

You didn’t want to tell Isabel that death had hurt far less than life had. Didn’t want to beg her to send you back into that clean, endless pool of soaring stars and eternal night. Didn’t want to make her see that you wanted more than anything to go back, to leave her living in this painful, terrible state whilst you were left with a sleep that would last forever.

Didn’t want to, but as you opened your eyes to see her red, puffy eyes, you found that you were opening your mouth to say the words that would make her understand.

But then Petra’s face swam into your vision, from above your head, as she roared orders to the people that must have been working that warmth back into your flesh.

“Keep working! She’ll slip back away from us if we’re lenient here!” You must have whimpered then – in longing, in pain – because she glared right down into your eyes and snarled. “Don’t you dare let go,” she snarled, her hands like molten gold as they worked near your shoulder. “I’ve been given an order, damn it – to bring you back. Don’t you dare go and force me to disobey, do you hear me?”

*Selfish. Cruel. Torturer.*

Petra must have seen the words in your eyes, because she suddenly bared her teeth and hissed through them. “Call me whatever you want, just get yourself back. Stay. If your hatred of me is the cost, I’ll pay it ten times over. Just stay – stay with me.”


“Don’t let go,” Petra whispered, your shoulder barking in pain as she tightened a bandage with enough conviction that you knew there was a heightening chance you’d pull through this. “Don’t leave me.” Your eyes snagged on the bracelet that was still, beyond all odds, around her wrist. Her gold eyes followed that movement, tears starting to leak from them.

“*Don’t leave me,*” another voice mimicked, and your heart – so recently restarted – froze solid.

Annie Leonhardt didn’t even look away from your eyes as she stood behind Petra and stabbed her through the heart.

***
Isabel didn’t even have the chance to scream as blood sprayed in a wide arc from Petra’s body, splattering on the ground, her face, on the clean bandages at Petra’s knees. The girl had been kneeling at Y/N’s head, her sword sheathed – no chance of fighting back.

Isabel snarled, even as she scrambled back to get away from them. Coward – coward, to sneak up on a harmless girl healing the wounded. She opened her mouth to hurl it at the blond monster, who now looked down at Y/N and smiled.

Y/N.

The girl who had been dead just five minutes ago, who was barely hanging onto life as it was, roared at Annie Leonhardt with the eternal hatred of a battle cry as Petra’s body just fell to lie next to hers. Isabel watched in stunned disbelief as Y/N tried to move – to sit up, her hands inching towards the sword that had been in Petra’s belt.

But then three figures emerged from the foggy smoke of the battle ground and stood firm, their stares as sharp as the blades at their sides. Annie’s eyes narrowed as she swung her gaze from the girl still trying to muster the energy to hold a sword aloft and went to greet her new assailants.

“Petra?” One of them called, and Isabel could have cried anew at the laughter behind it. Oluo didn’t know that one of his treasured teammates had been taken from him. “Is this thing bothering you?”

Eld, Gunther and Oluo stepped out of the mist, grinning through the blood decorating their faces and uniforms. At the silence that greeted them – the dying moans of others fading into the background – Isabel watched as they understood, one by one.

Eld saw the body first – the unmistakable head of copper hair, the golden eyes that hadn’t even had time to close before the life behind them had faded. Isabel could have almost heard the way that he swore softly, his hand whitening around the handle of his sword. Gunther was next, and he was turning for Oluo before Isabel could blink.

Oluo screamed an inhuman noise, his face twisting into the picture of grotesque pain. He stumbled towards Annie, the girl straightening her spine and rolling her head – as if this was a game, as if this were a sport that she found amusing to play. Isabel almost went for her rapier, to impale the girl from behind as she’d done to that beautiful, selfless girl that had given up everything to get humanity towards a fighting chance.

But Isabel Magnolia, despite being a tigress, knew that this was not her kill to make.

“What did you do to my fiancée?”

The world shook and stood still as Oluo screamed the words at the monster that stood before him.

Isabel’s eyes had never moved so fast as they flew towards Petra’s left hand, still holding a bandage even as it was splayed on the ground. The ring that shone from underneath the coating of blood and dirt was one of the most damning things that Isabel had ever seen.

Fiancée.

“We find the people that we adore in the weirdest places, don’t we?”

Isabel gasped, unable to help it. She’d thought Petra had meant Levi, as Petra had so often tried to talk to her about it – trying to talk herself into believing it. But no – Petra’s eyes had been on the male next to him.
Perhaps they’d always been on the male that now hurled everything he had to the thing that had now shut them forever.

Annie laughed – the sound sharpening Isabel’s fury into a thing that made her barely able to see straight. Never had she been so willing to go and kill – never. For a thing that laughed at the lives it tore apart, at the people it casually and leisurely ripped to pieces, Isabel would damn herself to hell for the chance to slaughter it.

But then something put a knife across her throat and whispered, “don’t even think about it.”

*

She knew that voice.

She’d been comforted by it several times before, when she’d been falling ill or falling asleep. She cursed herself for not thinking ahead, for not realizing that where Annie would be, Reiner and Bertoldt would likely be on her tail. Somehow, she wasn’t surprised that these three had managed to survive the battle that had taken place.

“Let’s just watch how this plays out, shall we?”

“I am going to obliterate you and everything you care about,” she said, and meant every bit of it. Reiner huffed a laugh down her neck that had her skin crawling in disgust.

Before them, Oluo stood before Annie with his sword held strong in front of him. Rage and grief hardened his face into something that Isabel barely recognised. He took a single step towards the immobile girl, his sword wavering as though he wasn’t quite decided on where to stab her first.

And it was in that second that Isabel knew that he was going to die.

In some people, grief shattered through everything that they were and forged it anew, making them immovable in their faith of themselves. Grief became a tool for themselves to do something, to accomplish a goal as small or as large as they dared.

But Oluo was not one such person.

Isabel wasn’t sure when she started crying, the tears silently tracing down her cheeks. Too many, she thought, sagging against Reiner even as she felt him croon in delight. There’s been too many tears today. It may have been at the start, when Oluo raised his sword and lunged for her.

Or it might have been at the end, when Annie made all of one sweeping move and suddenly, his body fell next to Petra’s in a bloody collapse. Annie scoffed as she heard his final cry, and in a moment of absolute cruelty kicked his body away from that of his beloved. Isabel knew, then, with an absoluteness that steadied the shaking in her limbs.

Annie Leonhardt was a monster.

Eld and Gunther leapt in to face her together, their faces set in a mere furious glare. Annie met them strike for strike – her swords like liquid silver, mere steel extensions of her arms. Isabel did not flinch once at the sounds of their blades hitting each other again and again, in a dance of violence that could be ended at any moment.

Gunther fell first.

Eld a mere five seconds after.
Still, Y/N tried and failed to rise. Failed to summon the strength she must have been begging her body for, even as she drew Petra’s sword from her belt and clutched it with enough desperation that told Isabel that perhaps even Y/N would not be able to stand against that monster, even if she summoned that strength to first rise.

But then a sword flashed, and Annie took an involuntary step back, the blade stuck into the ground a mere inch from her feet. “You missed,” she said, and suddenly Isabel was not on the battlefield. She was in the dormitories, in her room. She was surrounded by her friends, having a mere sleepover that ended in laughter – and possibly wouldn’t end at all. This monster that wore the face of someone who’d once shared that memory – had once shared a blanket with her, sat with her during meals – the monster had her voice too.

It wasn’t fair for this beast to have the voice and face of the one that had been her friend.

Levi’s eyes went straight to the bodies that littered the ground that had been clear a mere few minutes ago. To the bodies that had, a few minutes ago, been moving and talking and living. Isabel had to wonder if he forced himself to not look at Y/N – if he knew that he couldn’t stand seeing her again, not knowing that her eyes were now fixed onto his. His eyes did not waver as he scanned the other bodies, however, his eyes landing and staying on the body that Isabel knew would sway the scales.

Petra had been everything good in this world.

And she

Was

Gone.

Even Isabel couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment Levi Ackerman snapped. He’d been barely hanging on – the need for revenge presenting him with at least a temporary reason to function and fight. But seeing the bodies of the team that he hadn’t considered the possibility of losing –

He was moving in for the kill faster than anything Isabel had ever seen.

She doubted even he could see the attacks he was throwing at the thing that had once been called Annie, or if he even cared about anything besides the fact that they were hitting. He went back and forth, like a sea waging war on itself, striking fast and true. Too soon, her blades were on the ground besides her, sagging on her knees before him. There was not a bit of skin that was not bleeding, that was not bruised as she looked up at the man panting before her, his chest rising and falling with a lethal rage.

Annie opened her mouth to say something – her lips shaking to form the words around a bloody trail leaking from where a tooth used to be – but before she could even make a sound, Levi stooped and sheathed his own sword. She paused, her eyes sparking. Not with hope; Annie knew that she was dead. But there was still curiosity, as there had always been with her – curiosity about the way that Levi Ackerman was going to slaughter her.
Levi kept those onyx eyes dull as he drew the daggers that he’d taken from where they’d fallen after Y/N had used them to stab Orion. One with a white stone set into the amber handle – the other black. The white one was lined with blood, still wet. Levi ran his eye down the small length.

“I did it for her, because I love her,” Annie whispered, the words almost lost in the blood dribbling from her mouth. “Everything, for her.” Mikasa Ackerman’s leg whipped out and cracked against her skull, causing the girl to crunch wetly onto the ground with a dull look that screamed defeat.

“You did not take my brother for Y/N L/N,” Mikasa said, disgust ruling every part of her voice. “You took him because you are an evil, disgusting beast and you wanted to punish the one that stopped the titans’ attack on the city. You took him to teach the rest of us a lesson, about impersonating titans. You took him after one of the things over there,” she spat, gesturing to where Reiner and Bertoldt were still beside Isabel, watching their ally’s execution take place, “tattooed him, from the moment after they recognised that he was the son of the man they truly wanted.”

“You did not make her into a titan for her,” Levi continued. “You made her into a titan because that is the only thing you knew how to love. You couldn’t truly adore her as a human, not when everything in you screamed to eat her as you looked upon her. You made her into a titan, destroying everything that she was, for yourself. You killed her long before she died today.”

Annie looked up at him, and part of Isabel wondered if Levi knew that the words he’d just spat had already killed her.

But then that white stone in the dagger handle sparkled as Levi swung it in a gloriously wide arc, and Annie Leonhardt would never say anything else again.

***

“You –”

Isabel did not let Reiner say anything more as she jerked her hands up to grab the handle of the knife and pushed it away from her neck with every bit of strength that she possessed in her small, muscled frame. Did not let him make a single move against her as she practically wrestled that knife away from him and twisted her body so that she pressed it against his throat in a promise of death.

“You bastard.”

“Going to obliterate me and everything I care about?” She could have killed him for the scorn in that one sentence alone. Could have killed him for the look in his eyes, the look that told her that he wasn’t afraid of her even when she had a knife to his throat. She could have scoffed – for he should have been afraid of her. Should have known that the rage she was grappling with in her very veins would blister its way out, towards whoever was stupid enough to ask for it. “You’ll find that very hard to do.”

“And why is that,” Isabel purred, wanting him to feel afraid, wanting him to at least know what it felt like to have her and her friends’ lives played with by others –

“Because you are something I care about.”

Once, Isabel might have hesitated.

Might have had to restrain her lips from trembling, or her heart from weeping for him. Might have had to stop herself from remembering the times where he’d cared for her, where he’d hugged her, and she’d felt the fluttering of something down in her stomach and skin and heart.
Isabel had loved not one, but two titans in her short span of a lifetime. And once, she would have hesitated.

But now she had her brother looking at her with a look of pride that she’d never seen before. Now, she had Mikasa giving Reiner what could only be described as a look of happy farewell even as Mikasa started running after a fleeing Bertoldt.

Y/N was looking at her. Just looking, as if there were something worth looking at in her eyes, on her face. And it was that stark, open and honest look that made it all too easy to stiffen and send that knife home.
The sun rose steadily, shining through the smoke of the bonfires that were still simmering.

The corpses of titans were being dragged to those foul-smelling piles – soon, all they’d be was ash to fertilize the fields and become the ground on which new life would grow. Graves were being dug for the humans that had perished on the field, the number a staggering amount that had Isabel’s eyes tearing up if she dared to contemplate it for a moment too long.

But she stayed with her back to the medic’s tent, keeping one hand on her rapier at all times – just in case.

At first, she’d been unsure of who had won during their battle. Too many human lives had been paid, and too many titans fleeing into the forest.

She was still unsure.

But the fact that a medic’s tent was working behind her, doctors coming from the city they’d so readily defended to aid them – that was something.

Mikasa stomped up to Isabel, grumpily wiping her swords on her already destroyed trousers. Isabel didn’t hesitate to hold her arms up, to which Mikasa gave her a wary glance before allowing Isabel to embrace her. “I got Bertoldt,” Mikasa said, simply. “He was trying to make off with Eren, again.”

Isabel, once, might have winced. She did not now. “Reiner’s dead.”

Mikasa nodded, stepping away from Isabel only slightly to look out along the ruined field. “I haven’t seen anyone else for hours apart from Eren. You?”

Isabel jerked her thumb at the tent behind her. “I’m waiting for news; didn’t want to go looking for everyone else just yet.”

It was true; she didn’t want to go looking. Half of her was impatiently waiting, yearning to know that her friends were alright, to know that they were breathing and able to come for another sleepover in the future. The other half of her knew she couldn’t face it if there was another loss.

She savoured knowing Eren was alright – he must have been, if Mikasa was calm enough to be talking to her, watching soldiers assess themselves and their beloved dead.

“My brother’s alright,” Mikasa confirmed. “One of them, at least. What about yours?”

Isabel closed her eyes for a heartbeat. “He wouldn’t look at her body – he doesn’t know. He went to go and find Erwin – he hasn’t returned.”

Mikasa shot her a sidelong glance. “Risky, letting a distraught Ackerman go off on an errand by themselves.”

“Maybe,” Isabel agreed, screwing up her face in disgust as a blast of wind swept the smell of festering flesh to surround her. “But I didn’t want to give him false hope.”

Hope was a delicate thing, but in the hands of an Ackerman, it was dangerous.

Y/N might not have survived the next few hours. They’d all known it, from the moment that she’d
taken a gasping breath that had anchored her into life again. She could slip away, easily – so easily. And she was what Isabel was now guarding with one hand on her rapier, just in case.

Her, and others.

Farlan was in the tent as well, after being crushed by Isabel’s horse. Isabel knew this, for she’d dragged him into it herself. But where he would live, others’ lives hung in delicate balance.

“Pixis needs to call the school together,” Mikasa said, allowing Isabel’s confession to be lost to that foul-smelling breeze. “Away from the soldiers – so we can see who’s left.”

Neither of them knew if Pixis was still alive, but Isabel nodded anyway. “You need to find Armin.”

Mikasa’s mouth tightened slightly. “I do. Eren said he was going to try and find him – but if he can’t, I need to be there.”

“I’ll be here,” Isabel told her, allowing Mikasa to see the dismissal in her eyes. “If you need to find me, after.”

Mikasa inclined her head, shot a glance behind Isabel into the forbidden sanctuary of the medic’s tent, and set off – to find Pixis, Armin or Eren, whoever she found first. It occurred to Isabel that the Ackerman girl hadn’t come to find her, specifically. Mikasa had probably seen the look in Isabel’s eyes and had known that she’d dispatch Reiner, even before Isabel herself had steeled herself.

She’d come to find news about Y/N L/N.

Isabel didn’t blame her. After all, Y/N and the Ackermans were a phenomenon known only to each other.

Mikasa disappeared into the smoke, leaving Isabel to stretch and place her hand back on her rapier. Just in case.

*

It seemed that Mikasa found Pixis first, hours later.

Isabel tried to gauge the sun’s position in the sky, trying to determine the time – but smoke still suffocated all light by the time it tried to reach the soldiers and students, so it may as well have been early morning.

For all Isabel knew, it was.

A horn sounded, trumpeting the same sort of tune that announced the Headmaster when he made proclamations to the school through the speaker. Isabel knew it was for her – but she was still without news, without knowledge. Then a hand touched her elbow, and she tensed.

It was her instinct to turn and draw her rapier, but it was her inner thoughts that overrode the instinct that had been perhaps the only thing that had saved her during the battle.

She’d know this hand even if she were blind.

“Farlan,” she sighed with relief, face crumpling as she turned.

He was there, a walking stick under one arm and a smile on his face. His hair was filthy, but
someone had taken mercy on the state of his face and had mopped him up the best that they could. He held his other arm open, and Isabel fell into his side.

“I’m sorry about Strawberry,” he whispered, his hand cupping her face and running his thumb down her cheek – not saying anything about the tears that he found there. “She was a magnificent horse.”

Isabel didn’t bother to choke the sounds that her throat wished to make.

She sobbed into Farlan’s chest with no restraint, and he stayed with his hand on her cheek, brushing stray tears away and kissing the tears that threatened to drip from her nose.

Farlan Church had always known that Isabel Magnolia was a tigress, had never doubted her power. But when she sobbed her heart onto his dirty shirt and the bandages beneath, she could feel his adoration; he knew that she was human, and that humans were breakable.

“I am – so glad that you’re alive,” he murmured into her hair.

She knew it was an understatement – she could hear his heartbeat, after all, with her head pressed into his chest. “I love you,” she said, her voice hitching under the weight of her tears. “I love you.”

She said it again and again, until she was crying to the sound of her own confession.

Farlan waited until she lifted her hands from his shirt to wipe her own tears away and grabbed at her hands before she had the chance. He didn’t say anything more. He leaned forwards – Isabel was so much shorter than he was – and kissed her, softly.

Isabel only then realized that he was crying, too – because his kiss was damp, and his tears fell onto her cheek to mingle with her own.

She cried more because it was at that moment she realized that they’d won. Farlan could kiss her a million more times, a million more ways, and they had a future where he could.

For now –

“Go,” Farlan whispered onto her mouth, knowing what she was thinking, knowing why she was still crying. “I’ll stand guard here. You go answer your summons.”

They did not say that it was perhaps one of the last times she maybe had to – after all, why would a school for killing titans exist if there were no titans? They did not say goodbye.

It was instead perfectly understood in the kiss where Farlan sent his tongue skittering over her bottom lip – not to ask for her mouth to open, but in a silent promise to continue this, their life, later.

Isabel took her hand off her rapier and began walking towards the sound of the horn, allowing her tears to dry on her face, unable to help the wobbling smile form on her lips.

*

Isabel joined the milling circle of students, gathering around where Pixis stood on a raised box. Her headmaster looked grim – not despite, but because of the smile lighting his face. He looked like he was emitting energy and for the first time, Isabel thought, he looked sober.

Isabel started looking around and couldn’t stop herself, even as other people were still joining
them.

She saw first years, third years, people in her own year that she hadn’t really spoken to but was still filled with the staggering relief that they were still there. “Alright,” Pixis yelled through his speaker, his voice staggeringly loud. Isabel would have attempted to cover her ears, like some of her peers, if she hadn’t already known that it would make no difference. “Get into your classes, with first years on my right following through to the third years to my left!”

Whilst this did not particularly help the confusion, it did help disperse the students into a more even gathering.

Isabel’s heart leapt as she glimpsed Sasha, and she followed suite as she jumped onto her friend.

“Isabel!” Sasha squealed, hugging Isabel so tightly that Isabel’s laugh was choked out of her. Isabel’s own squeal was heightened as she realized that Connie had been seated at Sasha’s feet, the boy’s eyebrows rising with delight as he scrambled to his feet to join the hug.

The three of them held onto each other, hands grabbing their uniform tightly enough to hurt but no complaints were heard – just shaky laughter.

“You managed to live!” Connie crowed, standing deliberately on Isabel’s toe. She had a feeling that he would’ve offered her a fist bump, had his hands not already been balled up at hers and Sasha’s shoulders.

“You managed to not die!” Isabel crowed right back, hitting Connie with her hip so that he was nudged off her foot.

“Titans did their best,” Sasha said through her grin, looking at her leg pointedly. “But we’re counting that as a victory, because it means we didn’t let them do their worst.”

Isabel swore filthily at the blood crusting the wounds on Sasha’s leg, but the only thing more Sasha was willing to offer was a mad few giggles at the word she’d uttered in response. “It might get infected, you idiot!”

“I’m going to the medic’s tent after,” Sasha brushed Isabel’s concern away, winking at her. “I just wanted the people with the most grievous injuries to be treated first.”

Sasha was often mistaken for thoughtless, for selfish – Isabel knew better, and it was why she was unsurprised at her casual selflessness. “You’re still an idiot,” Connie said, to which Isabel and Sasha fell to giggles that were less amusement and more happy delirium.

“You seen Mikasa yet?” Isabel said, once Sasha’s giggles had calmed. Connie shook his head, concern making its way onto his uncharacteristically stern face. “She’s alright – I saw her recently, I was just wondering if she was here –“

Sasha’s fist tightened as she blinked relieved tears away. “Mikasa’s okay too?”

“Of course, she is,” Connie grinned savagely. “And if she’s okay, that means Titan-boy is fine!” Isabel nodded, to which Sasha and Connie began immediately laughing again. The three of them were jubilant, alive, vivacious.

“I heard something about Titan-boy,” someone said behind Isabel, and she grinned so widely at Armin that her lip split.

“Where have you been?” Isabel weakly demanded, even as Connie whooped and drew the blond
into their circle. “Mikasa and Eren have been looking everywhere for you!”

“I was with Erwin Smith,” Armin said, his eyes calm even as his voice shook the slightest amount. “Helping dispatch soldiers after the titans. He said that my brain was needed more than my sword.”

Sasha clapped, but only once – the sharp sound drew too many stares, too fast, too immediately scared. Loud noises would plague all the students here for a long while, Isabel knew, even as Sasha smiled apologetically at those she’d worried and continued to bump fists with Armin. Isabel took the opportunity to look around – to see the students looking for their friends, for the ones that hadn’t yet reached their groups. To see students who already knew that someone wouldn’t come back, to see students who were clinging so readily to whomever they recognised so that loss became an easier burden to carry.

Mikasa and Eren, it seemed, had followed the sound of the horn.

They were silent as they streaked through the people to reach their brother, tackling him to the dirt between them both.

It was the only time that Isabel had seen Eren keep up with Mikasa – so far from the broken boy that had tripped after struggling to keep up with a mere jog. As Eren laughed weakly into the grass, arms around Armin, Isabel stopped worrying about him ever being fixed. Eren would adapt. That’s what strength was – and Eren was one of the strongest. At least, that’s what she thought until he looked up at her with those stunning teal eyes, happiness shining in the way he smiled. “Horseface – where’s Horseface?”

Isabel looked around, expecting Jean to start swearing incessantly at Eren’s name for him – but she couldn’t find him.

Her heart seized with cold. She deliberately didn’t look at Connie – didn’t want to give one hint to him that he could perhaps be the only survivor of Team Greed. But she saw her panic mirrored in Eren’s eyes as he stood slowly, thoughtlessly helping both Mikasa and Armin up with him.

“Jean is alive,” Armin said, slowly. It was that slowness that gave it away – that told Isabel that Armin knew far more than he was letting on. “He’s alive.”

“Where is he?” Eren asked, instantly, swinging himself to look Armin in the eyes.

Armin shook his head, closing his eyes. “I saw him – you can’t go to him. Not right now.”

Isabel’s heart did not unfreeze as she pondered the million things that could have happened. “What about me? Can I go to him?”

A year ago, Isabel would have rather she died than rush to Jean’s side the moment he showed weakness. That was not what their relationship had been about – their rivalry had served to irritate both, far more than what was necessary, and to amuse the onlookers as they watched the two argue about everything under the sun. That was no longer the case now – they were soldiers, and more importantly, soldiers together.

So Isabel was about to snarl at Armin to tell her where Jean was, before Sasha grabbed her hand and forced her to look back at her headmaster.

Pixis still looked rather jubilant.

“Listen to me, students. I have more than a few things to tell you about your futures from now on…”
The students were all seated on the grass, no one particularly caring that the mud was doused in blood when they themselves were probably a great deal filthier.

They were not used to having what Pixis had offered them, after all.

A choice.

For the first time in a long while, the students of Assassination Academy had power – power in choosing their own futures.

The world would still need an army, after all – and it seemed that Assassination Academy would relocate, binding themselves to the Survey Corps directly instead of continuing as a separate organisation. Isabel could imagine that Erwin – now head of everything – was quite happy with himself. No longer having to infiltrate the school under the guise of a student, or ordering his soldiers to continue acting as mere students there.

And Pixis allowed his students to choose – whether to go back to their families and homes, if they had them, or to continue their enrolment in the academy.

Not to be assassins of titans – but to be true soldiers.

A heavy choice for children to make, Isabel supposed, but a choice that all the people sat here would prize, would cherish, would protect.

The fog had disappeared now, and the remnants of the battlefield were able to be seen. It was less messy now that the bodies of titans had been burned, and the bodies of humans buried to minimise disease and further snacks for any returning titans to satiate themselves on.

Isabel could see Jean.

She only managed it because Eren gasped first, his eyes fixed entirely on the boy’s figure more than a few hundred meters away. No one else but Eren could have recognised him at that distance, except from perhaps Marco.

Isabel’s eyes met Mikasa’s, and the two girls found they knew what had happened immediately.

Marco.

There could only be one reason for why Jean was standing in front of a grave, his sword still in his hands.

“I said that he was alive,” Armin said, holding Eren’s arm tentatively in case his brother decided to start running. “Not that he was alright.”

“I –“ Isabel started, her voice breaking immediately. “I just thought – where Jean was, he’d be with –“

“Yeah,” Connie said, even as he grimaced and screwed his eyes shut so that no tears could escape, “we all thought that.”

Isabel was glad that Jean was alive – it meant that Connie still had a member of Team Greed left.

But she was the only one on Team Envy.

*
When Pixis announced that all of the students remaining at the institution would be moving out within the hour, Isabel had to restrain herself from strangling him. Jean had still not moved from the grave, even though it had been filled in with whatever spare dirt that the soldiers could manage to scrape from the bloodied earth. It was not right to force him to move, to force him to think and make decisions after the one thing that Jean Kirstein had never even questioned being at his side had been taken away from him.

“Erwin was trying to find Levi, last I saw him,” Armin was telling her – although she was barely listening, looking out across the field to her friend. “Isabel.”


“If the students are leaving,” Armin said, slowly, “then the soldiers are probably going to follow, but later. You won’t have a hope of finding your brother after that – because I doubt he’ll go on for much longer.”

That, combined with the tone of Armin’s voice, achieved both her attention and her panic. “Is he hurt?”

Armin pinned her with a pitying look that had her remember the tear tracks were still wet on her cheeks. “Not physically. But he’s – he’s not... There.”

Isabel nodded – she’d expected nothing less, and nothing more. Her brother had lost his squad, Petra, and even his greatest reason for living, for moving. One after the other, in the most brutal, simplistic fashion.

Isabel would mourn Petra every day for the rest of her life – she knew this as well as her own name. But if Y/N L/N did not walk out from the medic’s tent, secure in the life that Petra had paid for with her own, Isabel wasn’t sure she’d want to keep going.

Farlan would help – as best he could.

Her friends would help, as best they could.

That was all they could do, when faced with war and loss and tragedy. They could each only do their best at sleeping and waking up the next day and making sure they could repeat those simple actions, every day, until one day it was slightly easier to do so.

If that day ever came.

“I need to go to him,” Eren said, and Isabel blinked – she’d thought the exact same words, but for a completely different person.

“Are you sure you’re the person to do this?” Mikasa asked, from where she was cleaning her blades. “After Marco?”

Armin shot a glance to his sister but said nothing. Isabel, however, took the bait. “Why wouldn’t Eren be the person to go to him?”

Eren flushed, curling in on his knees – not for stability, as Isabel scrutinized him, but in a memory. “When you lot rescued me from the titan dungeon, I wasn’t myself. I’d lost myself. Jean – Jean
was so much himself, so entirely not pitying about me or my condition… He was Jean. And I couldn’t help but be myself in his presence.” Mikasa didn’t look as devastated as she might have once done at Eren’s declaration. Neither did Armin; they both looked out towards Jean with a quiet gratefulness.

A debt, Isabel realized. They believed they owed a debt to Jean for giving them their brother back, for standing at his side whenever he was unsure, for the casual brushing of fingertips against the back of Eren’s hand whenever he needed it.

Everything that Isabel had ever seen shared between the two boys shifted itself magnificently in Isabel’s mind, and she wondered if she’d always been so blind.

“Y/N knew. She knew about us – she put Marco on Team Envy. Marco didn’t come that night that Reiner and Bertoldt gave us the message of war because he’d been fighting with Jean about me. About Jean’s interactions with me.”

“I see why Mikasa isn’t sure you’re the person to go up there,” Isabel said, softly. “But only you can decide what you’ll do when your loved one is hurting.”

And she left Eren staring after the one he wished to go after, and started walking towards the one she wished to go after.

Patting Sasha’s head as she left, she started walking in the general direction of where the rest of the soldiers were gathered. Levi might not have been there, but she knew Erwin would be.

* It was not hard to find the tall leader of now a very large Survey Corps.

He was standing in between the students and the soldiers, allowing Mike to give the speech to his remaining soldiers. “Magnolia,” he said, voice soft not from intention but from overuse. “Have you come for him?”

“I don’t know what I should do,” Isabel said, honestly.

And they looked on to where Levi was standing.

His back was to them, which Isabel thought was probably for the best. She didn’t want to see those deadened eyes ever again – seeing his broken silhouette was hard enough. Y/N’s daggers were held in each hand, their blades dull with the dried blood that Levi hadn’t washed away.

Levi always washed his blades – sometimes even in the middle of battle.

But here he was, looking at blades that belonged to someone other than him, not bothering to even wipe them in the grass.

“Levi,” Erwin called, still in that soft voice. “Isabel’s here for you.”

“Isabel,” Levi said, voice breaking. He looked over his shoulder at her, and Isabel was moving. Levi moved the black-stoned dagger into the other hand with the white twin, opening up his arm for her to throw herself under. “You’re alright, still.”
“You saw me kill Reiner,” Isabel said, and her voice suddenly felt rather heavy in her throat. “I did it. I killed him.”

“I know,” Levi said, and pressed his cheek against the top of her hair. “I know you did. You saved people by doing that. People like your infernal crew.”

Isabel nodded against his chest. She didn’t want to call herself a murderer – but if that was the price of saving the people that she loved, she’d pay it. Her brother didn’t hate her for it; it couldn’t be a truly bad thing.

She didn’t want to ask how Levi was doing – but what else was there to say?

“Levi –” she started, but cut herself off quite abruptly as she felt her brother’s chest tighten at the mere tone with which she’d said his name. “Petra.”

“Petra,” Levi choked, and then Isabel was the one embracing him instead of the other way around. “She was – she was –”

“I know,” Isabel said, because Petra was, and they understood that perfectly and utterly painfully.

They stood like that for a few more seconds – only pulling slightly apart when Erwin’s shadow cast over them both. “She was a fine soldier,” Erwin said.

Isabel supposed that from Erwin, there could be no higher praise. But Levi made a choking sound that startled her until she realized that it once, maybe, could have been a laugh. “Soldier,” Levi repeated, his eyes empty. “She was more, she was Petra, she was –”

Isabel cut him off – if only because she couldn’t bare hearing the past tense being used in connection to Petra Ral. “She was, Levi. But she was most proud to be a soldier. And she was,” Isabel said, eyes burning yet again, “a fine soldier.”

“Not the finest, though,” Erwin said softly.

Levi turned away from them both, looking towards where the sun was rising. “Don’t.”

“I didn’t say a name, Levi,” Erwin murmured. “I didn’t say her name.”

Levi’s breath hitched. “Please, don’t.”

Erwin looked at Isabel before staring at his second. “Don’t what? Respect her and the things she did all of her life?”

“I can’t hear about her!” Levi broke. But he didn’t swing around; didn’t draw his sword, didn’t glare. He merely slowly lowered himself to the ground, his knees in the mud, and held his head in front of his face. “I can’t do it! You don’t get it, you bastard. I don’t know who I am or who I am supposed to be without knowing her, without knowing she is here.”

And then he was up again, pacing, his eyes clenched closed. Isabel didn’t think he was yelling at her, or even Erwin – but perhaps himself, for not realizing just what Y/N was to him until he had to lose her forever.

Although, she thought that he had always known just what Y/N was and would be to him. But he had been scared – scared to let anyone have that much power over him, scared to let himself love someone so much and have to lose them.
And he had.

Erwin looked mightily puzzled – and Isabel came to the abrupt realization that Erwin knew. Erwin knew that Y/N had a chance to live, lying in the medic’s tent, guarded by the man who held Isabel’s heart.

“You don’t know, do you?”

Isabel elbowed Erwin sharply, ignoring the fact that it probably hurt her elbow more than any pain caused in him. How did someone even get those kinds of muscles? He was a mass of tension; every inch of him screamed that he was a leader.

A weak noise reached their ears and broke Levi away from his pacing as all three of them looked to the edges of the meagre line of forest.

Isabel saw the stormy grey colour first and mistook it for fog, before she realized that fog did not neigh. “Skira,” she breathed. The horse did not look in the best shape; her flanks were covered with dried blood, and she was limping. But the horse was alive, which was more than Isabel could say about her own beloved mare.

The horse stopped a few feet away from Levi, ears flicking forward as the horse evaluated the situation for herself and gracefully lowered her head – and started grazing in the patches of grass that weren’t wrecked by the mess of blood and mud.

Levi didn’t even bother to acknowledge their new companion’s existence; he just stood in front of the girl’s stormy grey mare, staring blankly at the sky as if flatly denying anything in relation to Y/N’s existence.

“I didn’t know how to tell him,” Isabel muttered to Erwin, who looked at her with hard eyes. He disapproved – the twitch of his mouth betraying how he felt about Levi being in the state that he was.

“I can’t say that I lost her,” Levi said to no one, his voice breaking. Isabel’s heart strained to her that falter in his speech, to see how Erwin immediately moved to stand at his side – but her arm shot out, catching at his elbow and halting him in his attempt to offer some sort of support to his second. “I lost her last time – but that wasn’t as bad as this, because there was the slightest possibility that I’d find her. I knew I’d find her again. But this…”

Isabel wanted to tell him, right there and then – but it was so rare for Levi to speak like this, to speak so blatantly without contemplating who his audience were, or what underlying messages it would send.

“She is not lost – she is dead,” Levi choked. “And I will never be able to hear her damned name without feeling like everything is being torn, inside. Fuck, my chest is so tight that it feels like fire – my heart feels like sandpaper, beating her name again and again. I won’t be able to look at little E/C things anymore – not without looking a second time and hating the fact that they aren’t her eyes. She’ll never look at me again – at anything. I’d rather be dead!”

Erwin opened his mouth, eyes flashing – but Isabel grabbed his hand, surprising even herself. She shook her head – knowing that he’d probably been about to deny it. But Levi would not care for pretty words. She knew that much.

“Dramatic, Ackerman.”

Isabel’s heart stopped.
There was nothing except the blurring of the world as she twisted her body towards the source of the drawling voice, the cocky tone of two simple words. There was only one person able to communicate a world’s worth of boredom in only a few select syllables.

Y/N L/N had never looked as beautiful as she did right then.

Her skin was smudged with dirt and blood and worse, and the bandages that she was swathed in did not look better. Her clothes were little more than filthy rags – and Isabel nearly rolled her eyes at the fact that she was wearing Petra’s new sword, and that it was the only clean things on her.

Isabel had never seen anything so perfect as the way Y/N smirked, drawing her lips into a fierce warrior’s smile.

Blinking entirely too fast, Isabel suddenly realized that she was leaning against Erwin as her legs shook beneath her. The man himself seemed to be entirely speechless – as none of them had been entirely sure that Y/N would survive the few hours it would take to patch her up.

Of course she had. Y/N L/N was a royal pain in the ass, and she’d never fall to a mere sword near to the heart.

Levi fell to his knees in the grass.

Y/N smiled, as radiant as fire, even as her eyes welled up. “Had a bad day, Ackerman? I can bet mine was worse.”

***

Levi was beyond speech. He raised his arms as if praising a new-born goddess, his eyes on nothing but yours as you stepped slowly towards him. Each step was a small piece of torture – second only to the thundering pain in your shoulder. With each small step, you were testing yourself.

By rights, you shouldn’t have even been awake. But there was something about surprising Levi with your survival that simply beckoned.

The moment you reached him, you knelt carefully. Knocked his knees with your own, allowing the small contact. His arms did not shake as they closed around you, his fingers brushing your jaw, your cheek, your neck.

“You’re real,” he said, so quietly that you could have breathed and missed it. You smiled, so widely that you felt your lip sting as it split.

“I’m real.”

“You’re not dead,” he said as his fingers went up to follow the curve of your ear.

“Death was boring.”

“Life was not life without you,” he said, and then he gasped. That small sound broke your restraint – you started to cry. “I do not want life without you.”

“What do you want, Ackerman?”

Your tone had always worked wonders. Levi’s eyes shimmered, banishing the emptiness that you’d seen and hated. His hands lightly drew you closer, pressing your foreheads together. You kept your eyes open, focusing on his dark eyes. “I want you to listen to me, just for a minute. And then I have
You smiled, and you were so close that you felt his lips stretch in kind. “Yes sir.”

“It’s not important, because you died today and now you’re alive and I should be thanking whatever religions exist in the world –“ Levi caught himself, wincing. “I should have told you before, but you already know it, so I was stupid enough to not want to say it –“

“Levi,” you said, and kissed him.

He was so extraordinarily gentle as he leaned into you, pulling your knees so that they met with his, his lips wet with his own tears. “Y/N L/N. I love you, and I hate to say it – because love is not a strong enough word to communicate how I would tear this world apart and built it from the ground up just to see you live and breathe and smile as you are now. Love is a pathetically short word for the lengths I would go, the amount of sins I’d commit just to see you move and be. But since there is not yet a word to communicate the soul-crushing feeling that I have, still do and will always feel for you, Y/N L/N, I am forced to settle for love. I am in love with you, Y/N.”

He kissed you at the end of his words, the desperation of his mouth telling you just how deeply he was in love with you even without the words he’d said before.

“And the request?” You said, hands running down his neck as though you were trying to convince yourself that he was real, that you were real.

“I want you to apologise for being such a drama queen with your entrance instead of just coming straight to me and kissing me senseless.”

“Not for dying?” You whispered and gasped at the way his hands tightened over your own at his neck.

“Your death destroyed me,” Levi admitted, his voice sticking over the word ‘death’. “I know you told me not to waste the life you were buying for me – but I don’t want it, Y/N, I don’t want one without you – I had it for half a day, and that was already an eternity. I can’t do it again. I wanted to try, but I just –“

His voice faded, as if he were hearing himself and suddenly felt self-conscious. “Levi Ackerman,” you said, and lifted your hand. You took off the iron ring from your ring finger, running your fingertips around the smooth, cold metal. “I don’t need the reminder anymore.”

And you put it in your pocket.

“He’s dead,” Levi murmured. “Orion was killed.”

It wasn’t an important question, but you asked it anyway. “By who?”

Levi smiled, but his lips were still trembling. “It seems that your Mother is still a human. She killed him with her own sword.” Luckily, Levi had expected that shock would have speared itself through your heart at the declaration. You didn’t insult him by doubting him, not for a moment – but you knew, immediately, that it was something you needed to see for yourself. Your Mother, the Titan Queen – perhaps not even that. “She disappeared once killing Orion; we don’t know where she went.”

You heard the hidden question. “We have the freedom to go and find her, you think?”

“You quite literally are back from the dead,” Levi said. “I think Erwin Smith will do anything for
you right now.”

“And you? What will you do?”

“I want us,” Levi simply stated. “Where you go, I go. If you want to go hunting for the remaining titans and your Mother, I will go hunting alongside you.”

Your lips stretched into a smile. “I know where all the bases are, you know.”

Levi frowned, for a heartbeat. “What?”

“It was part of my plan, remember?” You smiled, jubilant. Life was painful – infinitely so. But you wanted it, wanted it so badly. “When I was only a titan. I learned where all of the bases were, what routes they took, what plans they had. We can exterminate them.”

“It’ll be our project,” Levi replied. “What comes after? Us?”

“There will always be an us,” you said, and kissed him again. Kissing him was something you would never get tired of, would never feel that there was anything better. “We’ll decide what comes after when we get there. Together.”

You grinned then, your hands finding their ways to lie over his chest. To feel the heartbeat that was beating without rhythm. Life, you realized, was this.

Life was sitting knee-to-knee with him, foreheads touching, memorising the way that there were rings of grey and silver and black within his eyes.

And now that you knew what it truly was, you wanted it.

*

Isabel was kind enough to give you and Levi around ten minutes in the mud just talking before she stormed over and tackled you back into the mud.

“You have many things to explain to me, you absolute idiots,” she said, her arms around you and Levi. “Namely, what was death like? Which religion had it right?”

You brushed her hair away from your face, scoffing. “Death was boring, dearest. But as I didn’t really get to stay there long, I don’t exactly know the answer to your question. We’ll have to answer that at a much, much later point in time.”

Farlan, having kept Isabel company after you and Levi had been talking, joined you in the mud. “I reckon you’re so morally ambiguous that neither heaven nor hell wanted to evaluate you,” he said. “I’m sure the same sentiment goes across the other religions.”

“Don’t we worship Sashaism?” Isabel posed, blowing him a kiss. “They’ll allow everyone, surely.”


“You don’t get to say that,” Isabel told him, sternly. “Not when you two have had far more drama than all of our school year put together.”

Levi hummed at inclined his head at her, to which she stuck her tongue out. Erwin drifted over, looking at you with a fond look in his eyes of steel. You wondered, quite randomly and only briefly, if the man had ever cried. “Hello, Sir,” you said, and smiled up at him.
“Hello, Y/N. I don’t suppose you know anything about the situation back at the capital city, do you?”

You cursed his name fondly – an odd sentiment, but something that you believed in wholeheartedly. You had not forgotten about Historia Reiss - but she had not forgotten about you, either. “None at all. But I would appreciate it if you supported it – especially with the school backing you, now. Support her. She’ll need someone at her side who knows the world.”

Erwin laughed. “Where will you go? How will I find you?”

You bit your lip briefly before Levi ran his thumb along it, the sensation sweet considering he’d wiped it free of most dirt on his cravat. Isabel gasped as she hit Farlan lightly on the shoulder repeatedly. “They’re moving out of the school – the students are going to the capital.”

“Yes,” Erwin said, concerned. “Was that not made clear to you?”

“Shut up,” Isabel told him, sweetly. “It means that there’s a castle that’s going to be abandoned.”

“Yes,” Erwin said, again, but this time with that same calculation in his eyes. “I’m not going to give you a castle, Magnolia.”

Isabel pouted, but stood up and jabbed him in the chest. “No, but you’re going to give us a castle. We have a princess in our midst, and I don’t know if you’ve heard, but even Death himself didn’t want to have her on his heels for too long. Imagine what she’ll do to you if you don’t give it to us.”

Levi stood too, helping you to your feet and wrapping an arm around your waist so that you could lean heavily on him if gravity decided to wage too painful a war on you. “You owe it to us,” he said. “You owe it to me, surely.”

“You didn’t kill me when you were an assassin,” Erwin agreed. “I did appreciate that.”

“Even though you deserved it,” Levi said, grimly. “You put my face into the mud.”

“I thought it was an improvement,” Erwin replied, even as he smiled. “Hanji will miss you.”

“As if both of you won’t spend weeks round our castle, visiting to get away from your busy lives,” you scoffed, laughing. Erwin’s face brightened at the casual invitation, even as Levi rolled his eyes as he couldn’t help but smile.

“I never supported vigilante justice,” Erwin said, beginning to walk away to address his remaining soldiers, straightening his back. “But I find myself looking forward to our partnership, Y/N. Keep them in line. And I trust my former second,” he said, pointedly, “to keep Y/N in line.”

“As if,” Levi said. “I’m still your second. You can’t find another like me, anyway.”

“Don’t think so highly of yourself,” Erwin teased, and strode off. “I still have Mike.”

“I knew they weren’t straight,” Farlan said, and held out his hand for Isabel to high five. “You owe me dessert.”

“Isabel Magnolia,” you said, turning to face your best friend. “Did you just get us a castle?”

Isabel blinked, before her face split into a grin that was bright enough that you smiled as well. It was not a smile that was bright 

_ despite_ the losses you’d all faced. It was a smile that was bright 

_ because_ of it, because they deserved to be remembered with a smile, because those of you that
remained needed to live so brightly to outrun the darkness that people had died to keep away.

“You know, I always did like the mansion and the main building,” you mused. “I call dibs on whatever room I so desire.”

Isabel scoffed. “I can’t wait to explore it – explore it for real, with no secrets, with all the keys in my hands.”

“We won’t be ok for a while,” Levi said, and his hand squeezed your waist. “But one day, we’ll wake up slightly more ok than the day before. That’s what we’re gunning for.”

“First and foremost,” you said, leaning your head on his shoulder. “I’m the princess, and I need to gather my court.”
Softly, gently, snow fell down from the endless silver sky to land on the already white ground. The trees had long since bid a temporary farewell to their leaves, their lovingly empty fingers caressing the sky with no colours other than a bouquet of silvers and whites and greys. The lake that had once been bursting with fish and plants had frozen, the glazed mirror distorting each of the man’s fine features to the extent that he hummed a soft laugh, looking down with eyes that held such delight at the sky above him.

This man didn’t seem to feel the cold as it danced around him, the wind playfully rushing around his body and coaxing his hair into an untamed ballet of endless movement. He was dressed in white trousers and a brown jacket, the emblem of two wings embroidered on the back of it seeming too small for the man who bore them, the man who seemed to already be part of the sky without needing flight to aid him. He wore it with ease; the numerous leather straps that decorated his thighs and chest were bound loosely, the picture of relaxed simplicity doing nothing to hide his frame and muscular figure.

Levi Ackerman did not mind being alone.

If anything, he revelled in being one with the wind that seemed all too pleased for his presence, with the cold that was steadily turning his nose bright red. He did not mind being alone when it was his birthday, on this particularly cold Christmas day. It gave him a chance to enjoy just having his thoughts to occupy him for a few minutes. He did not mind that he was alone whilst the people in the city he’d just left were surely celebrating together. He was glad, if anything, that the people – those valiant souls who had endured everything beyond all odds – had repaired so much about themselves and the city and the world that they lived in that they could feel such happiness on this day.

The true reason to why Levi Ackerman did not mind being alone, however, was because he did not feel lonely.

Loneliness had once whispered to him using the wails of the wind, had once caused him to cry on this very spot. Loneliness had drawn out his sobs, clamouring to hear the sounds he’d locked within himself when he was alone and lonely on the cold hillside just one year ago. Loneliness had been a haunting and empty feeling to the extent that he’d hugged himself whilst craving another set of arms instead of his own, that he’d crouched down into a tiny ball so that his legs were close to his chest. Despite the sobs that loneliness had tortured him into releasing, he hadn’t lost his balance, no matter the sobs that had punched his chest with sickening force and had been thrown into the silence of the snowy world around him.

But that had been one year ago.

And although Levi Ackerman was alone now, he was not lonely.

“Waiting for something?”

Levi amended his thoughts; he was now neither alone nor lonely, and he was content. He turned to Erwin, blinking slowly at the larger man. Erwin smiled a small smile, looking down at his second with a fond shine in his eyes.
“I was just remembering something,” Levi said, even though he didn’t have to explain himself. Erwin would have understood his silence; they’d known each other long enough for silence to be something that each cherished in each other’s company, knowing that it was truly a peaceful thing to have between the two of them. “How I felt – here. A year ago.”

“It’s not like you to be nostalgic,” Erwin said, amused. He was right – as Erwin Smith often was. “Did you really miss this place in the two weeks that you’ve been with me?” Levi suppressed a smile this time, offering a grumpy frown instead – to which Erwin laughed and began walking down a sand path that was now covered in snow.

Many things had changed since that battle in the wide, gaping field. Even longer since the other battle, where Y/N L/N had given herself up to save so many people of the army.

Levi had missed this castle in the two weeks he’d been at Erwin’s side for Historia Reiss’s coronation. People were always coming and going from the castle that Y/N and Isabel had named “home” – but only a select few were allowed to permanently reside there.

Those select few were, like all others, constantly coming and going. They were free to roam as they pleased – to the city, to the vast world beyond the tall walls that no longer formed a prison but a mere protection from the wind. And, on cold days such as these, mere things to look at – since the wind does whatever the wind desires. But mostly, they came and went on the missions and work and jobs that Y/N asked them to complete – but only if they desired to.

Levi had left two weeks ago on one such trip – to provide support to Erwin Smith, who was one of the precious few that had unlimited access to home and was greeted whenever he dropped by with a spare room, many curious ears and good food. Together they were at the head of the army that formed under the reign of Historia Reiss.

Another one of the precious few who were welcome to come and stay as they pleased.

“I am assuming that you were telling the truth when you told me that your beloved demanded my company for Christmas, and not instead a ploy to entreat me to freeze to death?”

Levi frowned further as he tutted and walked after Erwin, kicking the snow away from his boots. They’d already come from the stables, leaving a grateful Raven and Erwin’s massive horse in the capable hands of one of the staff members that had visited from Y/N’s other property – the Underground City.

She was always willing to aid anyone who lived below and wished to rise, regardless of whether or not they could truly afford to. Historia and Y/N were working together on expanding beyond the walls of the city to make room for the now rapidly expanding population.

Such peace the people now felt.

“I thought we’d at least be warm in your castle,” Hanji told them as they caught up to her, waiting in the entrance hall of what had once been Assassination Academy. Levi hit her sharply on her shoulder, turning to see Mike leaning against the wall.

The four of them placed their coats on the walls, Mike surging forwards automatically helping Erwin with his.

It had been a shock to Levi to discover when he checked in, two weeks ago, to find that Erwin had lost his arm. The man had spent weeks learning how to balance himself without the weight of an arm, and weeks more learning how to fight despite it. Titans were few and far between thanks to
the hunting efforts of the Seven Deadly Sins, led by Y/N – but when Erwin had gone out to do some scouting into a territory that Y/N hadn’t known, he’d left a piece of him there, surrounded by a den of titans that were steadily starving.

Levi knew the moment that Y/N found out, she’d drag a few of the teams under her control to exterminate them for what they’d done to Erwin.

Erwin seemed content enough to lean on Mike as they walked steadily into what had used to be an assembly hall.

Hanji was a common enough guest that she bounded ahead, passing numerous paintings that decorated every inch of the hallway – all bearing Isabel’s signature. Hanji liked home well enough; especially since she was in charge of teaching science to the numerous children that now lived here.

“Hanji, if you even dare get my floor dirty, I will kick you out into the farm!”

Olyver greeted them at the door, glaring at Hanji whilst brandishing a broom. Levi inclined his head – he rather enjoyed the company of Farlan’s half-brother, if only because he was a better cleaner than anyone else present. “You say that,” Hanji replied, grinning wildly, “but there are numerous children playing with toys on said floor.”

The children – because there were numerous children playing with new toys, muscles and lanky limbs flailing everywhere – looked up and were delighted at the sight of their eccentric science teacher. “Hanji! You’re back!”

“And you’re back from the Underground!” Hanji said, stalking forwards with a jovial wave to the four men she left behind. “Did Y/N bring you here for Christmas?”

“Only under the condition that Olyver babysits us,” one of them replied, and Olyver cast a look of long suffering at Levi.

“The sky is always pretty, here,” Olyver said, his eyes marking the way Levi’s face grew a little more grave. Those who came from the Underground could always mark the face of one who grew up there too – it was a given that he and Levi could understand each other perfectly. “After a few days I’ll take the children back down to our house – we’ve got a good food system going, especially now that there’s more room.”

“I’m sure you could stay here,” Erwin said, eyes on the children.

“We could,” Olyver agreed, beginning to lead the three men further into the room that had been decorated with paper chains, tinsel and pictures. “But the Underground is our home; we miss it.”

Levi only had a few brief seconds to prepare himself before someone cannoned into him.

Not just someone.

Y/N pressed her face into his shirt, her arms flying around his shoulders – and Levi used her speed to pick her off the ground and spin her, her voice spiralling high in delight whilst still muffled against the material of his shirt.

“Hello, sweet,” he said as he set both of her feet back on the ground.

“Hello, love,” she replied, and kissed him. Numerous sounds of disgust filled the room – mostly a few giggles from the people around the large table at the head of the room, but a lot of gagging
from the children that weren’t distracted by Hanji. “You’re back,” Y/N said.

Levi smiled, but remembered that people were watching and instead raised an eyebrow. “Miss me?”

“As if,” Isabel said, standing up to greet Erwin. “She had me.”

“No, she didn’t,” Y/N said, smiling at Levi as she wound an arm around his waist. “Isabel went off on a joint mission with Mikasa a few weeks ago; they got back yesterday.”

“I still got here in time for this morning!” Isabel said, sitting back down into Farlan’s lap. Farlan shot Levi a look that Levi understood all too well, but still glowered in response. “Happy birthday, Levi.”

Farlan smirked and leaned around Isabel to help himself to some of her food. Levi rolled his eyes – the two had been separated for a mere few weeks, but it seemed that they were more than happy now that they were back in each other’s company. Farlan hadn’t been far from Y/N’s side much at all in the months since Y/N had walked out of that medic’s tent, alive.

After all, they were on Team Pride – they stuck together. So when Y/N went down into the Underground to manage affairs there, Farlan followed her – half because of his unyielding allegiance to her, half because he was curious to see exactly who Olyver was.

Levi doubted they were disappointed in each other – they’d met each other with no expectations, fully aware that the bonds they’d formed out of choice were more powerful than the ones that they’d come into the world with. But from the moment they’d met, Y/N had told him, they got on well enough.

Just as well – Farlan was his brother.

Y/N tugged him into sitting next to her, lightly kicking out Sasha from beside her. “Sit down, Mike, Erwin – you make the place look untidy.”

Erwin sat himself down and looked amused at the immediate movement of Mike hurrying to serve him. “Where is everyone else?”

“Where is your arm?” Y/N replied, quietly.

Erwin shrugged – an odd gesture now that only half of his body moved. “In the bellies of some beasts, I imagine.”

Y/N’s eyes slid across to meet Levi’s – and in the E/C depths, Levi could read her thoughts travel to the only solution that he’d predicted would come about. “Would you fancy a hunt together, my darling?” She said, softly.

Levi smiled at her. “Always.”

“To answer your question,” Y/N continued her hand sneaking its way into Levi’s, “Ymir and Historia, I assume, are still in the city – but they promised to come and visit as soon as they are able. Sasha has been here with Connie and Armin. Mikasa and Isabel here just got back yesterday from a mission.”

Mikasa lifted her head from the table, her eyes blinking blearily as she recognised the men now seated around her. “You cut your hair,” Erwin noted.
“You lost your arm, not your sight,” Mikasa replied, and put her head back down on the table.

Her hair was indeed shorter – no longer the length where it reached her collarbones, but a thing that now grazed her jaw. It suited her; as did the lazy tiredness that lined her body after the mission with Isabel. Team Lust and Envy were often operating together these days, Levi knew.

“Connie and Armin are upstairs planning a prank on the other pair that are due to return today,” Y/N continued, her hand tightening as Levi’s body stiffened. “Sasha is only down here for the food. Jean and Eren went off by themselves for a holiday, but they promised to come home for Christmas.”

Erwin smiled at the mention of the pairing of the two, but Levi sensed the torrent of emotion riding off his better half. The last Levi had heard, Jean and Eren had been trying to figure whatever it was between them out – but when they possessed a situation such as theirs, Levi didn’t feel even a little jealous.

“We’ll feast tonight, then,” Erwin said, grabbing a piece of bread. “We’ll wait for them.”

Y/N smiled at that – smiled at the knowledge that she’d done this, that she’d created a place for all of these lost people to come back to, a place where they waited for others and wished to make it better.

Levi loved her so much that it hurt.

This woman, this deity in human form, this creature who loved him back so fiercely.

Life was good.

***

The pencil was alive in her hand.

Isabel allowed it to dance across the paper in front of her as it pleased, the thin piece of wood adding the final details of Farlan’s eyes in her sketch. She was finishing the present for him – a drawing of them both in his treehouse, where the two had spent a rather astonishing amount of time the past few months. Numerous other drawings had been done – some of them not hers. She hadn’t realized that Hanji had other skills than being generally insane, but the woman had spotted her sketch and had compared it to her own. Between them, they had quite an array of scenes that emphasized Hanji’s realistic style with Isabel’s stylised one.

Isabel couldn’t wait for later – couldn’t wait to tear away pretty ribbons and paper, sharing the joy across the scattered people that she had come to love and cherish. Y/N, this year, would get to open the presents that had meant to be for last year, and that small fact alone made her so inherently joyful that it was almost impossible to feel anything else.

Almost.

Isabel leafed through the pages that she’d done before, searching for one in particular. She’d spent hours poring over every detail on this page, hiding it away when sometimes she couldn’t stand to look at it. Gold – so much of her prized golden pencil had been used on this piece, and Isabel Magnolia wouldn’t have it any other way.

Petra Ral wouldn’t get to open any presents this year, nor any other year that the rest of them managed to live through.
Isabel missed her – knew that everyone else missed the Special Operations squad so much.

It was strange; she had everything she’d wished for last year. She could go barging into Y/N’s room and hear her yell using the most commanding voice, telling her to get out. She could stick her tongue out at her friend and collapse into her bed, lying right beside her best friend’s body and just savour having that peace. She could go and wait for everyone to turn up in Y/N’s room, and although she’d yell at everyone else to get out as well, Isabel would know perfectly well just how much she loved it.

She could do all of that, this year.

But Petra couldn’t.

Isabel hugged the drawing of the Special Operations squad close to her chest.

Petra was the person that Isabel had spent so long wishing for without knowing it. Petra was the one who refused to let Y/N throw herself away. Petra was the one that had never given up trying to get Y/N back, trying to save her.

Isabel smiled through the tears that had, at some point, started to decorate her cheeks. Petra wouldn’t want her to grieve; she would have wanted her to celebrate. And Isabel had every intention of cherishing the Christmas where she’d be able to smile at her friend whilst brandishing her stocking like a weapon, and not have to worry about titans or death or an attack.

Isabel stood up from her chair, her uniform protesting as she stretched her arms above her head. She carefully put the drawing down on the prized position on her desk and blew it a kiss, stretching her cramping hand out as it complained, no longer having a pencil to curl around.

She heard Farlan running down the corridor and a sudden longing twisted her body towards the door – before she knew it, she was outside her door. Farlan stumbled to a confused halt, his hair a tidy thing on the top of his head, the sole opposite the mess that was her bird’s nest.

“Connie and Armin sounded the alarm,” he said, his face alight. “Eren and Jean are back.” Isabel squealed in response, grabbing Farlan’s hand and making to pull him down the corridor. Farlan, however, swung her so that her back was against the wall and lifted her so that her legs were lifted to his hips. “I only came to tell you,” he said, and kissed her with eager intent, “because it means everyone will be distracted.”

Isabel kissed him harder as she pulled his shoulders closer. Farlan moaned a little as she experimentally moved her hips, her ankles crossing tighter to stroke his behind.

“You only got back yesterday,” he said, unable to hide the fact that his breathing had gone to a messy, irregular thing. “And you slept for most of the day.”

“I was waiting for you to come into my room,” she said as his mouth broke away from hers and kissed its way down to her neck. “You didn’t come.”

“I thought you were sleeping,” he murmured onto the skin of her throat.

Isabel felt to her side and jolted as her fingers found a door handle – at the exact moment where Farlan’s hips bucked to meet hers. She gasped, wrenching at the door handle and thankful when it opened. “Inside - I’m sure we can spare a few minutes.”

Farlan wordlessly carried her into the bedroom, kicking the door closed.
They shed each other of clothes until nothing but their leather bracelets hung from their wrists – his, with the stone the exact colour of her eyes and a pretty gold ‘P’, and hers with her sparrow and the green ‘E’.

There was not an inch of Farlan Church that Isabel didn’t want, didn’t love, didn’t live for.

So many reasons to live. So many reasons to want it.

Isabel fell freely, knowing that she was a tigress, a sparrow, a girl who loved fiercely.

Knowing others would catch her.

***

Sasha woke up.

She was eternally glad that she was able to do so.

“Sasha!” Connie was saying, loudly, across the room. He knew better than to shake her awake – all of them did. “Come on! Eren and Jean are back!”

She shot up, energy coursing through her blood. She hadn’t been bothered to change out of the uniform she’d worn to dinner, so it was now creased in multiple places – she’d still wear it with pride. “Don’t you think this prank is a little childish?”

Armin, sitting next to Connie, looked at her with pitying eyes. “Our childhoods were stolen from us; we might as well act like kids now.”

Connie grinned at this, offering the same thing to Sasha. She grinned back at him as she tightened the laces on her shoe and grabbed one of the buckets that Armin and Connie had prepared a few minutes as she’d napped. Connie had always been there with her. It was hard to think about who she was without thinking about who Connie was too. He was her partner, her best friend, her everything. When she was playful, he appeared with sticks and started a play fight. When she was serious, he turned up with biscuits and tea.

They were the best of friends.

So now that he was thriving with chaotic energy, it was only natural that the same kinetic movements had found their way to Sasha’s core. Where he was chaotic, she was just the same.

They sounded the bell, running down the corridor with buckets in hands. They passed Farlan – who gave them a laugh and a smooth head shake before turning down the corridor that Sasha knew had Isabel’s bedroom on.

Somehow Sasha doubted either of them would be joining them for the prank.

Armin was laughing as he ran along, his arms strong around the bucket – even despite Connie’s pathetic attempts to tell him to be quiet. They got to the banisters that were over the entrance door, leaning over in order to see the pair about to be let in.

Y/N shot them an exasperated look as she nudged Erwin to answer the door with her hip, to which Sasha beamed with poorly hidden delight. They balanced the buckets of water on top of the banister with care, Connie sniggering at the crude simplicity of it.

“It’s freezing out here –“ Jean’s voice complained, the moment Erwin opened the door. Sasha
leaned over the railing a dangerous amount, straining to see how Jean pushed Eren inside before him, their coats pulled tight over their torsos. “You really demanded our presence, didn’t you — “

“Don’t expect any gifts from us,” Eren added, his eyes sharper than they used to be. “Our arrival should be a present enough.”

Exchanging a mischievous glance, Connie and Sasha motioned to Armin and all three of them tilted their buckets over the edge.

The boys hadn’t just put water in there – it was a deadly mixture of water and whatever liquid they could find in the kitchen. Cider, vinegar and many others that Sasha didn’t dare muse about poured over their heads, Erwin wisely dodging straight out of the way.

Y/N suppressed a smile as Olyver poked his head around the doorway and gaped at the mess that was now staining his carpets and the entirety of Jean and Eren. “You three will be cleaning that,” Olyver said, deadly quiet.

Levi – leaning against the doorway to the library – nodded his sage agreement.

Eren and Jean took turns looking down at each other and then themselves, sheer shock dousing them with much more effectiveness than the liquids had. “We have three targets,” Jean posed to Eren – who took a few steps forward to look up at Sasha, Connie and Armin.

“I could deal with murdering three people,” Eren replied back, smiling at Jean with such a pretty intent that Sasha nearly blushed.

However, the fact that both then dropped their bags and coats and began the wet dash upstairs to beat them up meant that she was far too busy fleeing for her life.

Laughing.

Connie ran alongside her, Armin leading them around the corridors with his quiet, sturdy run. He was laughing just as she was – loud, raucous, bold. Ordinarily, they’d both be attempting to be quiet – to not give the lovers that were chasing them any hint to where they were.

But both knew, with utter surety, that some laughs just needed to be freed.

***

Erwin Smith was not one to laugh.

He’d faced too many losses for that, now. He’d witnessed too many deaths and had ordered for them to happen so often that he didn’t think he deserved to laugh, even. Erwin knew that his soul had long since been destined for hell, and so he didn’t waste his time being alive by performing simple acts such as laughing.

But here he was, in what he imagined somewhat mimicked heaven in its peace.

People were laughing, running after each other with water and exchanging tackles that turned quickly into hugs or wrestles that turned mockingly into straddles over hips – and Erwin was forced to smile at the blush of Eren as Jean leaned over him and whispered something in his ear, both boys drenched.

Mike came quietly up behind him, his arm sturdy against the small of Erwin’s back. Erwin allowed himself to be steered away from the mess that was now the front hall, even as the culprits began
running through what had used to be a school – if only because Levi and Olyver were beginning to share the same dangerous expression as they both eyed the mixture that had begun dousing the carpets.

“I know what that look means,” Mike said, quietly.

What they had was the total opposite of Jean and Eren, or Y/N and Levi.

Jean and Eren had something loud and obvious and bright. They were forced for it to be so – to burn bright enough to keep the shadows away. The shadows of what might have been had people survived, the shadows of who they had lost. Erwin hadn’t known Marco very well, but he was entirely certain that the kind-hearted boy would have undoubtedly supported the boy he had loved loving another.

Y/N and Levi had something that was undeniable and true and infinite. They didn’t avoid the shadows of their pasts, but embraced it, wore it like cloaks and admired how it looked, were proud of the fact they could wear it like they did. They were a force – a law of the world, a pair that were forged to be wielded together.

Mike led Erwin back outside, into the brisk cold – Mike already having their coats over his arm, ready for when they decided their own body heat just wasn’t enough.

They were not a force of nature. They were not rowdy, or an obvious match.

“You can laugh, you know,” Mike said, softly. “You’re allowed to.”

Quiet.

That was what they were.

They were soft and quiet and careful.

Everything that had been forced out of them since they’d gone to war – that was what they were for each other. They never spoke to each other in a voice that was loud or sudden – only ever soft, pretty words that had been whipped from their minds in training. They never touched each other with hands that were forceful or desperate or brash – only ever worshipping, gentle touches that had no place anywhere in their lives except for the pocket that held them together.

Erwin allowed himself a question. “Am I really allowed to laugh after everything?”

Mike’s hand was sure at his waist, as it always was when they were walking. Erwin’s balance had long since been thrown off since his arm had been hacked from him – but Mike knew this without Erwin saying.

“You did that, in there,” Mike replied, and stopped walking as the lake came into view, admiring the way that the ice sparkled under the moon. Erwin was admiring him instead – his face, soft, and his hair, short. “You made it. Those people are where they are because you exist and made the choices that you did.” Erwin was inclined to disagree, but Mike shook his head at him – not interrupting with words, because that would be sudden and loud and that was not them. “If you did not exist, where would I be?”

“Happier, maybe,” Erwin replied. “Less damaged, definitely.”

Mike sighed. “How can you be so incredibly smart and still so stupid?”
“Tell me again how stupid I am,” Erwin said, his lips inching towards a smile.

And Mike was kissing him.

Their lips were chapped from the wind and the cold, and their faces were rough with stubble, but their kisses were still unhurried. Still soft, despite their skin not being so. Mike’s hand was still at his waist, but his other was pulling Erwin’s head closer to his.

“So stupid,” Mike murmured onto Erwin’s lips.

And then Erwin backed him skilfully into the tree, the proud oak tree that had stood through everything. Mike knew it was coming – didn’t gasp as his back came into contact with the bark, but merely leaned against it and looked at Erwin like he was worth being looked at.

Erwin fell for him once again – wondered, briefly, if he ever stopped falling.

Erwin placed his leg between Mike’s, bringing his knee higher until it came into contact with his groin. Still soft – still predictable.

Mike groaned anyway – a sound that was almost lost to the wind.

“I love you,” Mike said, and Erwin angled his head to place kisses down his neck. “I love your mind, your stupidity, your smell.”

“My smell?” Erwin said darkly, lifting his tongue from Mike’s collarbone.

Mike hummed, looking upwards to give Erwin more access under his jaw – and Erwin was happy oblige. “It’s everywhere. I could never stop smelling you on anyone I met – Y/N, Levi, myself.”

Erwin’s hand paused at Mike’s belt, and Mike went straight to aid him with the buckle without hesitation. “That’s strange,” Erwin said, even as Mike’s belt came loose and multiple possibilities surged in his mind. “I always thought I smelled of you.”

Mike hissed as Erwin began undoing the buttons of his trousers with his mouth, the metal zip cold against his teeth. “We don’t have to – not here, where it’s cold –“

“I can think of a way to warm us up,” Erwin said, and slid his own trousers down enough to free himself. Mike didn’t protest – just drew his arms around Erwin’s shoulders and kissed him – thoroughly, softly, heatedly.

“You’re a heathen,” Mike said.

Erwin was surprised enough to laugh, the motion jerking his body against Mike’s in such a foreign way that both of them gasped as blood rushed to their faces and other areas.

“Do that again,” Mike said, his lips brushing the shell of Erwin’s ear.

They said nothing more as noiseless laughter racked through their bodies, exchanging giggles and kisses even as they shed more clothes and made up for it with the heat of each other’s bodies.

No, Erwin was never one to laugh.

***

Mikasa woke up the moment that Levi knocked on the door.
The girl beside her woke up the moment after, and they blinked at each other for a moment before cracking the same, small smile.

“I think it’s for me,” Y/N said as she sat up.

“If he was coming for me, we’d both have to murder someone,” Mikasa agreed.

Y/N stood from the bed, her uniform stretching as her muscles did. She offered a sleepy wave to the girl she was leaving behind and swiftly walked out, wordlessly greeting the man who had knocked.

The moment that chaos had erupted in the front hall, Y/N had grabbed Mikasa’s hand and they’d run together in the opposite direction to the mayhem – straight into Mikasa’s room, where her bags were barely unpacked from her excursion with Isabel.

They’d been tired enough to soundlessly sprawl onto the simple bed. Mikasa had barely recovered from her trip, and Y/N was busy from the moment she woke to the moment she fell back into the rare sleep she got.

She got up, the bed feeling rather cold now that her friend had left.

She loved the people here – doubtlessly.

But still, she began packing her bag once again.

It wasn’t hard – the bag hadn’t been unpacked to begin with. She’d liked travelling and fighting alongside Isabel. The girl had an uncanny ability to ensure anyone and everyone liked her, which was useful when Mikasa’s own charisma was not particularly impressive.

But she was Mikasa Ackerman.

She wanted to go and find out what that meant.

Assassination Academy had meant everything to her when Y/N had rescued her and her brothers from that wagon. It had become a symbol, and she’d thrown herself into fighting. But the person she’d been fighting for had drifted from her side – and she didn’t blame Eren for it.

She couldn’t blame Eren for swaying from her – not when her own sanity wavered when he was concerned.

She loved home. She loved Y/N for giving it to her, for allowing her to come and go as she pleased.

But it was not where she truly belonged, behind walls and safety whilst titans were still there. She’d done a fair amount of thinking over the past year – starting it in the wilderness, where she’d found the part of herself that could be wild with it.

Grisha Jeager was still alive.

She was certain of it.

He was the reason that Reiner and Bertoldt had tried to take Eren – had tattooed him. There were answers out there in the world – and Mikasa would not find it here, where there was laughter and people to fall into bed with her and love projecting from everyone and everything.

She’d come back here, once in a while. She didn’t doubt this.
Someone knocked on the door the moment she’d finished zipping her bags shut.

She opened the door with some amount of trepidation, her hand hovering over the sword at her belt – but relaxed the moment she saw who was on the other side. “Armin – Eren. What’s the matter?”

“We know what you’re going to do,” Armin said, without preamble. “Can we come in?”

Mikasa stepped aside, only because she had no problem with them entering and seeing the bag. She was not ashamed of her decision – would not shy from it.

Eren’s eyes were bright as they met with hers.

“Where are you going to go?” He asked, leaning against the wall and frowning at the liquid dripping from his shirt.

“The city,” she said, because it was true. “I think I might follow Erwin back and join the army. Join Assassination Academy for real – learn to fight better as a team.”

Armin’s lips tightened, and she realized it was because he was about to cry. “You have a plan?”

“The scraps of one,” Mikasa replied, crossing her arms. “Maybe I’ll work my way up to become Erwin’s underling. That way I can follow him back here whenever he comes for visits. I can see people.”

She did not say that she would see them, because their core three had splintered somewhere along the way.

They had bonded together when there had been a crisis. But they had grown into themselves and had grown too large to be a part of that same bond years later.

Mikasa loved them.

It was undeniable, even as much as it was hurting her to think that they perhaps didn’t love her in the same way that she loved and lived and breathed them.

“We aren’t children anymore,” Armin said.

Eren coughed a surprised laugh – and Mikasa knew it was thanks to Jean that he was able to do even that. “No.”

“I look forward to knowing you as adults,” Armin then said. “I think I’ll join Mikasa.”

Eren and Mikasa were not shocked – because for that, they’d need to know each other as well as they had once done. But they had accepted that each of them were now strangers, were now people who didn’t know each other but still, somehow, loved each other.

“I’ll be the sword, you can be the brain,” Mikasa offered, and Armin smiled at her.

“Let’s start this year the same way we did last year,” he said, and they laughed.

Eren stopped laughing first. “Thank you for following me. I’m sorry I wasn’t the same as I was when I was kidnapped.”

Armin and Mikasa looked at each other, finding the same emotion brimming behind their eyes. It was not regret – just a mutual understanding that even if they’d known how it would turn out, they’d do exactly the same as they had. “I love you,” Mikasa said, shrugging.
“I do love you too,” Eren replied, and Armin blushed as he murmured the same thing.

“Mikasa and I will head off in the morning, then,” Armin said, shaking the blush from his face. “I think Erwin and Mike are a little busy at the moment – they walked out during our water fight.”

Mikasa nodded, and the boys stood to leave her room. “I think I’ll travel with Jean a little more,” Eren said, his eyes on Mikasa’s. She found they understood each other perfectly – she’d search for answers in the city. Armin would search for answers in the people they found there, and Eren would search in the wilderness.

“Fight well,” Mikasa said.

“I always do,” Eren replied with dignity that was slightly ruined by Armin’s resulting snigger and walked from the room, offering them a genuine smile as a goodbye.

“It’s strange,” Armin said, settling himself into Mikasa’s armchair.

Mikasa humoured him with asking the question. “What is?”

Armin smiled, and in it was the slightest hint of danger that got Mikasa’s blood running. She heard the echo of herself in that danger – because that was where Ackermans thrived. In fight, in danger, in blood. “I’m excited for tomorrow.”

And together, they planned their route to finding answers.

***

“I have your present,” Levi said.

You raised an eyebrow, your hand still in his as he led you through the corridors. “Is it the promise that you’ll stay with me for a bit longer before you go back and run Erwin’s errands? Please - let’s go hunting for a bit, just us.”

“I would never deny you the chance to ogle at my skills,” Levi replied, and earned himself a laugh in response.

“It’s not your skills that I ogle.”

Levi grinned and pulled out a package from his pocket. “I don’t know what you did with your key to the roof, so I got another one made for you.”

You laugh at him, taking the package in your other hand. “You’re not supposed to tell me what you got before I unwrap it!” But you looked at it – the key was tied to the package, something still hidden under the wrappings. “For me?”

“No, for the farm goat,” Levi replied. You hit him with your hip, jolting a garbled stream of swear words from him as he tried to push you back. “Don’t open it here – just wait a little more.”

You allowed him to lead you upstairs, down a route you now knew well. He leaned over and plucked the key from the strings, exaggerating his movements as he proved to you that the key worked in the locking system as the door clicked open.

“Stay there,” he said, and took a single step over the threshold and turned back to you. He looked angelic, standing before you like that. The chill air rushed to embrace you, and the moon shone around his head like a halo – the dark of his hair becoming almost silver in the light. “Y/N. We
have unfinished business.”

Your hands curled at your sides. “Oh?”

“You owe me,” he said, simply. He probably had no idea how much you did, in fact, owe him. How he’d saved you in more ways than one, how he’d laughed and healed and loved you – no small deeds.

“You want me to pay back my debts for your present?” You asked, your confusion only serving to amuse him.

“You owe me twenty-four hours of service,” Levi said. Your heart stopped.

And then decided it wanted to join a marathon for flat out sprinting.

“Step over that line and answer me a question,” he continued, pointing to the thin line separating him from you, “and your twenty-four hours start.”

You held his gaze as you stepped over the line. You didn’t need time to think about it – because if you thought about it, the more you’d feel embarrassed over how terrified you’d been of this little debt, won so long ago.

“Good girl,” Levi said, his eyes fixed firmly on your cheeks – which you could feel were aflame. “Now. Open your present.”

You opened your present, your fingers shaking with more than just cold. You discovered there were two layers – but the present that lay on the first layer was enough to send you into a beaming mess. “You made me a bracelet?”

The leather string that everyone else bore around their wrist indeed hung from your fingers, and you held it up to your eyes to see the charm on it. There was the golden ‘P’ that Farlan bore from his, and your heart felt absurdly warm to see what was next to it.

“A crown?”

Levi said nothing, and you looked up to see him furtively watching you.

Nervous – Levi Ackerman, the number one fighter that you’d ever met, was nervous.

“Look closer,” he said, a rare bite of sarcasm returning to his tone. You didn’t get upset – you knew it was only because of his nerves that he was apt to sink back into sarcasm. You looked closer and laughed at what you found – in tiny letters, making up the lines of the crown.

“You got me a charm of a crown made from the word ‘brat’?!”

“I always meant to get you back for getting me a poodle,” Levi said, his lip curling as he walked forwards to help you put it on. You looked at his neck – where the charm of the poodle hung from a necklace, its metal winking in the moonlight.

“Thank you,” you said, and meant it. The weight of the charms around your wrist were comforting in a way you hadn’t realized they would be.

“It was a collaborative effort from everyone,” Levi said, waving his hand. “My gift is the second one.”
He led you further onto the roof, the snow halting in its dance, the air stilling as you smiled at the plants that had bloomed for winter. Summer meant that the rooftop garden was a mess of colours and flowers – but winter meant that it was simple, strong, herbs growing in the cool dark.

You loved it just as much.

You slid a finger under the dark paper, marvelling at how tiny the next package was.

And two rings fell into your hand.

Golden bands – the weight of them proving how real and expensive they must have been to get. One of them bearing a white stone – the other bearing a black one.

“Answer this question for me, Y/N L/N,” Levi said, sliding onto one knee and holding out his hand for the one that was bearing the rings, “and your twenty-four hours of service will start.”

You didn’t hesitate to give him the rings that he’d made, immediately wanting them back in your own hands the moment their weight left you. “Ask me.”

Levi held your hand, looking up at you. You were a mess – uniform crumpled from where you’d been napping next to Mikasa, face unwashed. But he still looked at you and saw you.

And loved as he saw.

“Will you marry me, Y/N L/N?”

It was the first time you’d been asked.

Orion Ackerman had demanded. Had told you exactly what you’d be to each other.

Levi Ackerman, his mirror, was asking.

He hadn’t started your service – allowing you the choice, not forcing you to give the answer you’d always known you were going to give to him and him alone. The day that Orion had told you, had made to slide the iron ring around your finger, you’d looked away. Had watched the waterfall, your eyes fixed onto the horizon as if you could see the man kneeling before you right this moment.

Your eyes stayed on Levi’s.

Not on the horizon. Not on anyone else.

“Yes,” you said. As if there was a choice, as if there was anything else you could want more. “I will marry you.”

He slid the golden band onto your finger and placed the other one around his own. You slowly grabbed his ring hand in your own, admiring the way that the gold and the stones looked in the moonlight. He’d given himself the white stone, for the Ackerman’s, for humanity. Yours was the black – for the titans, for the L/N’s, as a reminder of what your soul had once been.

It felt so much smoother than the iron had.

You still wore the ring that had once bound you to another male – the male that had died from your own mother, his own sword at his throat. His mother’s daggers were still at your side – Levi’s mother’s. But the iron ring lay on a necklace, resting over your heart.

A reminder, as so many things were.
Of what could have been if titans weren’t real.

But whilst it was a reminder, you didn’t regret it.

Quietly, both of you moved to lie down, staring up at the stars – your new ring heavy on your finger.

You gave him no warning as you turned on your side.

To his credit, he didn’t flinch at the sudden movement as so many would have done. His eyes widened a fraction, but he continued to lie still. In the light of the moon, you forbade yourself to move and just let your eyes wander.

Here was a man who you loved without a question of a doubt.

He was a man who had changed his clothes immediately after you’d died that day months ago, hating the stickiness of your blood as it had clung to his shirt, his skin, his soul. Breathing in, you felt the echo of pain dust across your chest and shoulder, the tight scar tissue protesting at the movement. His eyebrow raised, just a fraction – he noticed the catch in your breathing, just as you now monitored the way his breaths deliberately evened out.

“My twenty-four hours of service started the moment I said yes, didn’t they?” You asked.

“They did,” he agreed. “But let me just look at you. For a while before…”

He trailed off, but you knew what he was proposing. The pressure began to build in your stomach, and your legs quivered.

You’d have forever of this, with this man at your side. You no longer wanted to fight him, wanted to beat him - because after everything, you’d both emerged victorious and in love and alive. There could be no better outcome.

You focused on his eyes last – those onyx eyes that had become a question and an answer, from the very first time you’d seen them to right now. Those eyes that could dim, could light and become steel grey, could flatten and communicate wrath more powerfully than his words ever could.

You looked into his eyes, finding them unflinchingly on yours, the eyes of your husband, your lover, the other half of your soul. They were so dark now, like the dark of the sky above you both, like the dark stain of your soul that he’d helped to heal.

So black, his eyes. You’d once been afraid of the dark, the everlasting night, and the unending piece of infinity that could be manipulated and twisted by the monsters of this world.

But you’d never waver from your love of Levi’s dark eyes.

After all…

No one talks about how captivating darkness can be.

Chapter End Notes

*~*
oh my god. It's done. It's over.
I started writing this story YEARS ago... like, I think I started when I was 15 (2015),
and now I'm a few months away from turning 20. This story has been a huge part of
my life - you have been such a huge part of my life for so many years, and I'm so
thankful that I got to share it with you.
Thank you so so so much to those people who commented - you so helped me keep
writing and inspired! I hope I was able to deliver a story that you loved just as much as
i loved reading your comments.
and so... I suppose I have to tell you goodbye ~ I hope that you have, quite simply, the
most amazing time living your life with no titans ;)

~Ria
xxx

End Notes

Hi beautiful and dangerous people!!! I hope you very much enjoyed this chapter, thank you
for your patience in getting this story written and edited and actually decent-ish to read!

I love all of you, please leave a comment below telling me what you think - I read and reply
to all of them!
~Ria

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!