This doesn't usually happen

by DesertRose07

Summary

He dislikes you. Well, to be fair, he dislikes just about everything: new crops of cadets, piles of paperwork, people who walk too slow. But there's something about you, daughter of low-ranking Mitras nobility who just waltzed into the Survey Corps, that makes his natural state of simmering loathing come to boil.

You may just be the most infuriating cadet he's ever encountered.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Knees kissing your chest, you press your lips together to prevent your teeth from rattling out loud. Another shiver racks your body, but at least that's quiet.

Surely they could have done better than this. You hate to fit the spoiled stereotype of your hometown Mitras, you really do, but you can't help but feel this is some sort of indirect punishment from him. Your back is aching in protest against the cold, hard, lumpy excuse for a cot that the Survey Corps village elders threw into your sleeping quarters. Which are fairly cramped, by the
way. How your roommate Sasha has managed to doze off in these subarctic temperatures remains a mystery to you. Perhaps a slab of marble from the Mitras Treasury would have been more forgiving on your back.

Yes, that's a good line. You'll have to remind yourself to rub it in Lance Corporal's face tomorrow. You suppose you knew what you were getting to, leaving Mitras to dedicate yourself to the Survey Corps.

Certain amenities, like hot water, could understandably be considered luxuries. Nevertheless, you are certain that with the regimented Survey Corps legions marching to their deaths each expedition, there must be some leftover budget for half-decent mattresses.

...too soon?

Your sacrifice, leaving the cloistered comforts of Mitras for a life of service to humanity, had not been welcomed with open arms, at least not by everyone. Years of debutante classes had groomed you into a positive delight; while this practiced charm had easily won you over Commander Erwin and Squad Leader Hange, Lance Corporal Levi remained elusive. Not that you were sorry. You weren't particularly fond of dark, brooding, powerful midgets with eyes whose striking shade of blue rivaled the tundra ice.

_Honest._

At the sudden sound, muscles seize and heart stops as you flatten yourself against the mattress. Survival instincts kicking in, you go stock-still for a few beats until your wary mind comes to appreciate the random roars in Sasha's snoring.

Stupendous.

Well you could not sleep and knew you'd pay hell for it in morning. For now, you might at least call to mind a particularly irksome memory. Maybe the rage will do you good, warm you up a bit.

Toes curled like ribbons in the tips of your sensible flats, you maintain the calm smile plastered onto your face. Mitras' never-ending social events have given you ample opportunity to practice, adding a natural quality to your performance. You don't know why you're nervous for this interview. It's not like the a legion made of the nation's poor and criminal is spoiled for choice.

But there's a certain sincerity to Commander Erwin that disarms you, a decency that makes you want to gain his approval because it would mean that you could be decent too.

"Miss (L/N), we're quite honored to have you here with us today," the Commander says, voice soothing like warm honey. "Your file is impeccable. Exceptional marks, an upstanding citizen. Intelligent, resourceful, driven. Most impressive."

You allow yourself a demure laugh and mumble a small thanks. Lacing his fingers together, the Commander presses on.

"I'm quite curious. To what exactly do we *owe* this honor?"

"P-pardon?"

Well damn, you can see why he's the Commander. You're almost rankled you fell for the compliments reeling you in. His bespectacled minion behind him is practically glowing with unholy glee. Squad Leader Hange, you think her name is. You'd almost forgotten about her and
the dark haired man in the back of the room, as entranced by Commander Erwin's spell as you were.

"If you don't mind my saying, you have never set a foot outside of Mitras, let alone even laid eyes on a Titan. Yet, you abandon the safest possible location this nation has to offer, to come fight, what must be to you, a terrifying legend? Why? If I were you, I certainly wouldn't!"

That impeccable smile of his will be the death of you, you're sure of it. There's no way you can contradict him now, not without implying that you're somehow more humane and generous than the leader of the world's biggest band of underdogs. He's wedged you into a clever corner.

"Not to mention, it raises questions about your judgement, with all due respect."

You can't be sure, given that you're facing the sunlit window, but you get the distinct impression that Hange is bouncing with delight. The silhouette next to her drives a none-too-subtle elbow into her side.

It's either now or never, either fess up to this cunning Commander or trudge back to your life in Mitras like a stray dog with its tail between its legs.

"You're right, Commander." You declare. "Right about everything. I grew up with three, square meals a day and a roof over my head. We're a lower-middle class family, but my father's name buys us a few favors. It's the only thing he's good for. If I choose to stay, I can look forward to the same life, if not more comfortable. Being paired off to the richest man my mother can convince me to accept, bearing children and working the family tailoring shop, day in and day out until my days run out. A good living. A safe living. But not life.

For (your age) years I've been dead, Commander, dead until I caught whispers of the Titans. That was the only thing that gave me life, gave me hope. The thought that I could reclaim ownership of my existence and use it to actually do something. Something for all of humanity, no less.

Perhaps you're right, in that my intentions aren't completely selfless. However," By now your voice has curled low into a hiss, the Commander and Squad Leader Hange leaning in ever so slightly to catch your next words. You allow your eyes to harden ever so slightly, revealing a glimpse of your true self.

"Intelligent, resourceful, driven. Your words not mine. And I will bring to your operation the same determination that propelled me over the ranks of every other student in Mitras. Because Commander, I'd rather die by the hands of the Titans than live another day in that gilded nightmare."

Haunting the corridor outside Commander's office, you strain to catch bits of conversation. The heavy wooden doors betray nothing. They've been in there quite a while, deliberating.

Just as the door cracks open you smoothly slip back, standing against the far wall. You turn your head in surprise, as if you had been looking in another direction all along.

"Quite the orator, aren't ya?!" Hange exclaims, striding over to clap a hand on your shoulder. "Whatever your status ends up being, we'll have to bring you over to rally the troops every now and then!"

At this, you break into your first genuine smile in a while. You rather like Hange, you decide.

"I was almost in tears," she swoons, batting her eyes with flourish. "Anyways, let's roll, shorty. Our
renumeration forms won't complete themselves, and apparently forcing cadets to do it is now considered abuse."

"You go on ahead."

They're the first words you've heard him speak, and you're jolted by how deep and smooth his voice sounds. Rumors and reputation precede this man, and legends champion his name. Whispers about underground dealings and dishonorable origins. Legends about how he singlehandedly brought humanity back from the brink of extinction. And now you're in his presence.

The one and only Lance Corporal Levi.

You turn your beaming smile towards him. Perhaps there's hope for you yet.

A gaze blue and cold as ice studies you, scrutinizing you detail by detail. Spotless and well-pressed clothes, a delicate watch circling your wrist, exquisite leather shoes.

Good thing you took pains to-

A surprised shriek escapes your throat. It's faster than you can detect. By the time you've processed what happened, the Lance Corporal has a fistful of your clean white collar between his fingers as icy eyes completely fill your vision. It isn't until you notice the stones of the wall digging into your back that you realize he was only waiting for Hange to leave.

"Listen up, you little shit," he snarls.

You sputter. No one you know would use that language in public, least of all with a lady.

"I don't care if Four-Eyes and Eyebrows are dumb enough to buy the crap you spewed out. No one," he punctuates his point by bodily lifting you and slamming you back into the stone "who's got it made" SLAM "up and drops everything" SLAM "because of a bleeding heart."

Wit's last accusation, he flings you down to the floor. Skull crashing into the ground, sparks explode in the corners of your vision as you scrabble to push yourself up and out of his way. Just before you can take flight, cold leather drives your cheek back to the floor.

As the sole of his boot crushes your face into the ground, you direct a furious gaze to the looming Lance Corporal. Tears prick at your eyes, and for the sake of your pride you want to claim that not a single one fell. Rage courses through you as the shells of your ears burn in humiliation. The lowest part of his body, that which carries him above muck and grime and corpses, now reigns supreme over the highest point of yours.

Never in your life have you been so belittled. Criticized by superiors yes, bullied as a child yes but never, never so formally humiliated. Directly in front of the Commander's office, no less. It's impossible that he didn't hear the commotion, you realize, if his standing as an army leader has any merit.

"Get ready to pack those bags and go running home," the Lance Corporal hisses, voice colder than the stones you have been pinned on. "Because I'm not letting some self-aggrandizing, silver-spoon-fed shit put my soldiers' lives at risk for the sake of her vanity. Got that?"

The boot digs deeper into your cheek bone and disgust is forgotten in the wake of pain. Grimacing, you grit your teeth and stay silent. Unabashedly, he drives his boot further down and the sole eclipses the hall, consuming your world. Building, merciless pressure finally forces you to cry out, scream pouring from your lungs. Defeat never felt so vicious.
He relents, but not without a final push for good measure.

By the time you collect yourself off of the floor, hands massaging your abused bones, he's halfway down the hall.

"Know your place, (L/N). And this isn't it."

It's barely above a whisper, but in the silence of the abandoned corridor, the threat nearly echoes.
Torsion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
It seems that you've only just shut your eyes when you're shaken awake by Sasha. Blinking and disoriented, you awaken to a darkened room. The sun is barely peeking over the horizon, and morning mist still shrouds the forest outside the castle. Your limbs ache in protest at the thought of getting up, the natural consequence of undergoing weeks of Head Instructor Shadis' ruthless Physical Conditioning regimen. Fortunately, being busy getting excessively whipped into shape means avoiding the Lance Corporal as much as possible. Nearly two weeks with no sight of him and you've never been happier.

A crumb-covered face looms over you, grinning with a ridiculous level of energy for this hour of the morning. "If you don't get up in five, I'm claiming your breakfast as mine!" Sasha chirps. Your eyes snap open. This threat to your interests is unacceptable. Launching out of bed, you inform Sasha you'll be taking her breakfast as penance for her ungodly snoring, thank you very much! That'll show the bottomless pit.

"It's a sinus condition!" Sasha wails, throwing a pillow at you, forcing you to duck while scrubbing your teeth. Over the past few weeks, you have managed to trim down your morning routine to ten minutes from your original forty; quite the admirable feat, if you do say so yourself. Nevertheless, you're willing to spend a few extra minutes exacting revenge against Sasha. You're a woman of simple tastes, after all. Pilfering Sasha's meal ticket, you race out the door and down the steps to the Mess Hall, sprinting to the comforting background music of Sasha's screams.

The scent of scrambled eggs, fried meats and hash browns tease your senses, luring you faster down to the steps to the Mess Hall. Quite the generous upgrade from the usual stale porridge and aging fruit. Seems like the cafeteria staff have gone all out for this occasion. As you enter, a familiar, horse-like face joins you.

"Morning ladies," drawls Jean. Throwing an arm across each of your shoulders, he nestles in between and steers the three of you toward breakfast. "Ready to be schooled in the art of 3DMG? Happy to give you some private lessons." This part is punctuated by a particularly salacious wink. Oh, the little devil.

"I already want a refund," Sasha declares. He sends you both a poisonous glare as Sasha devolved into giggles, but you've long since drowned out their banter. Trailing absently behind your comrades, you begin piling whatever you can reach into a tray. You've been eyeing this day from afar with competing excitement and dread. After three weeks of brutal physical conditioning, you were finally moving onto 3D Maneuver Gear: the trademark of a Survey Corps soldier.

You're only too happy to abandon Conditioning. Against leviathans like Mikasa, Reiner, Bertolt and Annie, your strength and stamina are average at best. Consistent mediocrity in the wake of these all-stars wears down the spirit, eventually; as happy as you are that their remarkable talents will help humanity conquer the titans, you can't suppress a growing irritation with their near perfect performance.
Running a mile in less than five minutes? Without even breaking a sweat.

Experience in and-to-hand combat? Try district-wide champion fighters.

Learning a new maneuver? Oh, they had it memorized after the first demonstration.

If you could roll your eyes any harder you'd be happy to oblige, but you're worried they'll get stuck in your skull. Fortunately for you, the 104th Training Corps Official Ranking averages Physical Conditioning, Coursework and 3DMG Dexterity. Scoring top marks in Squad Leader Hange's Titan Physiology classes has, thus far, bumped you up to lucky Rank Number 5 overall in the Training Corps. No small feat, given that Armin was your biggest competition for the coveted title of Class Nerd.

At some level, you are uneasy, recognizing that part of this stellar achievement is due to your history at Sheena Prepatatory, the most prestigious academy the state has to offer. Welcoming exclusively the sons and daughter's of Mitras' finest, Sheena Prep teaches using only the most renowned faculty and comprehensive texts, resources that you are certain these Outer-Wall cadets had never even heard of, much less had access to. Finagling an entrance to Sheena Prep had required significant sting-pulling on behalf of your mother. Growing up there had, of course, been miserable. As the daughter of working class parents, you tended to walk alone, never making it past the fringes of the student body. Nevertheless, their agonizing company had been worth it, if it meant that you could seize a Top 10 position now. Heart skipping a beat, you wonder how long this will hold.

"Yo, (F/N)! You trying to burn holes into that food with your eyes alone? Lighten up!" Snapping your gaze up from the tray, you nearly leap back from Connie. You hadn't even notice he Krista or Ymir join your group's bench.

Krista leans forward, eyes wide with concern. "You okay? You haven't even touched breakfast! I've tried to hold Sasha back but she got to some." You can't tell, but you think Ymir'a also sporting a sympathetic scowl, slightly less murderous than her usual scowl.

Turning, you fix a glare at the chipmunk-cheeked traitor sitting next to you. Sasha stares right back at you, unrepentant. "Ooh snooze, ooh loose."

"I'm fine," you say through a tight grin. "Just going over what I have to do later today."

"Then I hope you'll make some time for me!" Krista chirps. "I'm drowning in Titan Phys and know you're super good at that class. Would you mind tutoring me tonight?"

Your spirits lift while Ymir's scowl promptly re-engages murder mode. Perhaps you're underestimating yourself. After all, if others are asking you for help, you can't be in straits that dire. "Sure, no sweat! After 3DMG practice, okay?"

You let their excitement buoy you, listening in earnest when Connie talks about a growing conspiracy involving the Church of Walls, Royalty and Military Police. You squinted to try and read the front-page headline of the The Morning Bugle he was waving: MILITARY POLICE TO GIVE UP INVESTIGATION OF FATHER NICK.

The hair on the nape of your neck rises on end. You're suddenly acutely aware of Ymir and Jean's calculating glances towards you. Never once did you think your belonging to the Church of Walls would be a problem here, where people are uniting against a common threat to humanity. It's not
like you were a fanatic; it was simply the way you were raised, the way everyone is raised where you came from.

"Alright, we're going to head out," Jean informs you, kicking back his chair and rising with his tray. The others follow suit, and you realize you're the only one who hasn't finished eating. "Hurry and meet us at the Gear Shed outside. We'll buy you some time."

Alone in the Mess Hall, you return to your meal. It's just as well. you're in no mood to field questions about the Church.

The porridge that you're chewing suddenly rots in your mouth. Holy freaking Walls. Marching straight for you is none other than Squad Levi. The bane of your existence leads the charge while his elite entourage trail adoringly behind. His eyes are downcast, nodding as he listens intently to the pretty redheaded girl at his elbow. In the squad's midst, he seems strangely serene. Declawed.

You curse Jean for choosing a bench right in the smack-dab center of the Mess Hall. The only cadet left, you stick out like a sore thumb. You're not sure how much of your standing with Lance Corporal Levi there is left to ruin, but this will probably be the beginning of the end.

No matter, you think. He's preoccupied, and he doesn't expect to find you here. Keeping your head down, you pour all your attention into shoveling in the now-cold porridge with your shaking hands. With any luck, he'll pass you right by.

A light giggle assaults your ears. Ugh. It must be the redhead. It's never sat well with you, how closely she follows Lance Corporal Levi, star-struck every time. It's desperate, unrefined and you crinkle your nose in disgust. As well-liked as she is, the Survey Corps' sweetheart grates on your nerves. Not because Levi seems mildly interested in what she's saying while verbally eviscerating you, truly, but because she's one of the millions who fuel his undeserving reputation. ~Levi Mania~ the news had been calling it. You never understood the appeal. Fancy, airborne, metal ballet and brooding pouts does not a hero make. Especially when there are others like Commander Erwin and Squad Leader Hange who just as selflessly risk their lives with the added bonus of having actually grasped the concept of basic courtesy.

Voices are getting louder, signaling their approach. Just your luck, the monster is walking down the side of the aisle closest to your seat. Heart hammering, you force yourself to calmly take another bite, staring at the empty seat in front of you. The next seconds are the longest you've ever experienced, as you busy yourself with chewing and chewing and chewing to kill time.

No one notices you.

STEP

No one talks to you.

STEP

No one says your name.

STEP

And then they've passed your row, disappearing down the aisle towards the training grounds outside.
Cool relief washes over you. You've survived! Maybe, just maybe, he doesn't have it out for you after all; in fact, it was ridiculous to think that at all! Lance Corporal was probably just scaring you into discipline your first day as he probably does with every new cadet. You were overthinking things, as per usual. Chalking it up to nerves, you grin from ear-to-ear as you prepare to finally truly savor the porridge you've been eating.

You double-take as you notice your bowl. Something pale is floating in the porridge. Gingerly, you fish it out. A crumpled scrap of paper, hastily torn and jagged from the edges. Immediately, you recognize the font from this morning's headline.

"> GIVE UP <-"
Not bad, you decide. In the dexterity department, you'll easily do better than Armin and Krista. Bertolt would be more challenging for now, but you're ready. Collecting your comrades, you lead the way outside, where multiple individual Harness Training Stations await you in a large field. You exchange pleasantries with Armin, but in the back of your mind simmers the Mess Hall incident. This morning's stunt bothers you more than you care to admit. You have something to prove, and precious little time to waste.

Huddling around a Harness Training Station, your group watches with awe as First Sergeant Oluo balances in midair. It's a positively breathtaking spectacle, unnatural the way he floats midair so easily. So entranced are you that you almost miss his instructions.

"Alright brats! You've seen it, now it's time to put your skills to the test. Arlert, get up here!"

Calf muscles tightening, you shift impatiently from foot to foot as Armin teeters onto the platform, struggling to slip into the harness. He's too short to properly execute Oluo's smooth leap in. You cringe in embarrassment as Oluo bodily heaves him into the harness. Armin struggles to find his balance, but after a few minutes, manages to stay still. He's facing completely the wrong direction, but at least has finally stopped swinging.

Rubbing his temples, Oluo grumbles at Bertolt to disentangle his comrade. Turning towards you and Krista, he consults his list, before breaking out into a smile.

"L/N! So I got the brain in my group, eh?" he says, ribbing you hard enough to knock you back a few paces. "Step right up!"

Gritting your teeth, you nod. Before you can help it, you steal a glance towards the back of the training field, where two shadowed figures stand in the mid-morning sun. Immediately, you recognize the glittering bald dome of Head Instructor Keith Shadis as he surveys the progress of your Training Corps. Next to him stands a slightly shorter man, arms crossed over his chest.

They say some people have an intuitive talent for 3DMG. Every motion executed with A natural fluidity. You, as it turns out, are not one of those people. You're starting to panic. With high hopes for you, Oluo had given you more time to try and succeed than he allowed Armin, but the First Sergeant's patience is wearing ever thinner.

"No center your core, CENTER YOUR CORE!" Oluo roars.

You’d like to center your core upside Oluo’s head. His barked orders are the kerosene lighting the inferno that is your all-consuming terror. And he looked so nice, too! Pulse thundering, you struggle to imitate the demonstrations you had seen not twenty minutes ago. A growing crowd, poisonous whispers and knowing smirks are all you can focus on. No matter where you kick out with your feet or lash out with your arms, your limbs only slide through the air, never finding purchase. The sky you that once thought beautiful has now become your ground, taunting you with its distance.
Who'd she sleep with to get Rank 5?

Her daddy probably paid them off, the Mitras bitch

Ugh, how embarrassing

"You got this, (F/N)" Krista shouts, pumping her fists.

Digging your teeth into your lip, you flail your arms, struggling to push yourself upright. It's overshot and poorly estimated, toes skyrocketing up as you flip back.

"Oluo," he barks out. You have no idea when he entered the crowd, given that you're currently upside down and flailing, but he's suddenly front and center, sneering down his nose at you. “Get her down, she's a damn disgrace. You’re showing them the worst fucking example.”

Quiet snickers ripple through the crowd of cadets as you are hoisted back down. Out of your element and disoriented, your limbs are still flailing, like a net of freshly caught fish flopping listlessly on a ship's deck. Unceremoniously, Oluo drops you onto your hands and knees, all assisted services ending there. For the briefest of moments, your gaze lands on the Lance Corporal, who is staring you dead in the eyes, impasive of ever. Ever so slightly, the corner of his lip twitches, like a cat's tail leisurely curling.

By the time you blink, it's gone. In the state you're in, you may as well have imagined it. But you don't have time to linger. Desperate to remove yourself, you leap down the platform, swerving right before righting yourself and disappearing into the watching crowd.

You shove past the cadets and remain on the crowd's rim for the remainder of the lesson. One by one, the cadets each have a turn, but you can't hear anything. Ringing in your ears is the cruel laughter of your so called comrades. You drive the toe of your boot into the ground, smiling grimly as you pretend that the dirt beneath is the Lance Corporal's head.

After two more hours, you're released for afternoon. The redhead thanks you for your attention, which seems stupid and needless in your opinion, given that you didn't really have much of a choice as far as participation goes. You know that's catty and bitter, but you can't help it because Holy Walls, the midget did it on purpose. A swift, decisive attack in the seconds leading up to the moment that counted most. He had intended to psyche you out prior to the Dexterity exercise, a big one as far as points go. What's more, he succeeded.

You let him succeed.

Without waiting for further instructions, you spin on your heel and trudge up the hill to the stables. Horses are a hidden delight of the Survey Corps. Nothing soothes you so much as a long, quiet ride in the surrounding forests. Lost in your thoughts, you're jolted awake by the sound of hooves slapping down the dirt path.

Ymir and Krista, each mounted on a tawny mare, must have had the same thoughts as you."Hi F/N! Feeling better?" Krista warbles, waving to you from her saddle.
Problem is, there are never that many recreational horses to go around.

"Uh, yeah" you mutter, somewhat deflated. "Any more horses left? I was hoping to take a ride."

Brows knitted, Kirsta moves to answer when Ymir suddenly spurs her horse forward to stand in front of Krista's. "You're in luck, there's one more. Black stallion in the last stable, furthest row." Snatching the muzzle of Krista's mare, Ymir sends them both into a gallop, leaving you stranded on the hill.

Good Walls, she is obsessive. As if you were dying to join there little riding party anyways. Cresting the hill, you grab a set of reins, tuck a saddle into your hip and make your way over to the final row of the stables, peeking into each wooden structure. Stable after stable is empty, and when you finally reach the wooden door in the corner, you're almost surprised to see a horse pop out to meet you.

And what a specimen.

"Hi," you whisper, as if the softest sound would chase the majestic creature away. "Hello handsome, hello."

Large dark, eyes blink as a small muzzle comes out to greet you. Opening the hatch, you slip into the cool stable, taking in the beauty in front of you. He's tall and proud and striking, massive but finely built, with an elegant, arcing neck. You run your hands along his coat of hair, dark and endless as a starless night. There is a soft nickering in your hair as he sniffs his new visitor. This is a race horse, perhaps a show horse. Nothing like the stocky, brown draft horses you train on. Such a fine stallion can't possibly be the property of the Survey Corps.

A voice sharp enough to cut skin jerks you upright.

"Trespassing is a crime in the real world, Mitras runt."

The spell is broken. Whipping around to face him, you spook the stallion, sending him leaping across the stable.

Fucking Ymir.

Blocking your only exit is the fearsome Lance Corporal.

Throat dry, you squeak out the words as best you can. "Theytoldmehewasfree-"

"And in the real world," he continues. "Criminals get punished. " Arms clasped at his back, he begins stalking a tight circle around you, steps measured and predatory. Fixing your gaze at the horizon outside, you remain silent. Let him have his outburst; it may cool his anger, or better yet, tire him out. Even as he disappears behind you, sending ice-cold dread scuttling up your spine, you stay silent. "You utterly failed the first Dexterity exercise of the season."

Emerging from behind your opposite shoulder, he's suddenly closer than he was before. The jacket
billowing from his shoulders brushes your arm.

"Then, in retribution, you have the gall to try and steal Survey Corps property. My property. Fucking unbelievable."

Despite your situation, you bristle at this. Black beauty was not property.

Circle complete, he’s now eye to eye with you.

"...and instead of taking responsibility for your piss-poor conduct, you give excuses. Unacceptable."

At this, something in you snaps, and you’re unable to suppress a response. Leaning in close, charged and brazen, you snarl. "As opposed to bullying cadets, which is, apparently, totally respectable?"

His agility comes out in full-force, paralyzing and absolutely inhuman. Gloved fingers wrap around your bare neck, driving you into the back wall with a BANG. With a loud whinny, Black Beauty darts away, wanting nothing to do with either of you.

"Don't flatter yourself," he grunts. "You'll never be a cadet."

Scrabbling to tear away his hands, you dig your nails into his knuckles to no avail. "U-unHand Me!!" you choke out.

It's subtle, but you catch it, and it's alarming enough to make you stop squirming for air. His eyes are what give it away. Tundra ice has disappeared into pools of ebony. For a long while, he is completely still.

At long last, he creaks back to life. His head jerks to the side in morbid curiosity, as if he has suddenly remembered how to move, the gears of a grandfather clock stuttering into motion. Cold, leather gloves strum against the bounce of your pulse. Joints twitching, he gives an experimental squeeze.

For a second, you are completely cut off. Black spots veil the edges of your vision and you wrench your mouth open to scream silently. Pressure is released but not removed. A precious eternity passes before gloved fingers return to his side.

"Get out." he says.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, I love Arabian horses. Clever and spirited, yet soft and cooperative, Arabian horses were made for swift military raids. Plus they were raised in a challenging, desert environment, much like Levi’s upbringing in the underground.
....someone buy me a horse.

But more importantly, how is Reader-Chan going to prove Levi wrong?
In retrospect, allowing Eren to come was a terrible idea. It couldn't be helped; the spastic brunette had snuck up on you just as you slipped out of the castle past curfew. He had, naturally, threatened to tattle on you unless he scored an immediate invitation. By extension, it meant that Mikasa and Armin also joined, because the three are apparently connected at the hip. One one hand, this was a horrible decision, and you expected better strategic planning from yourself. On the other hand, this spontaneous, illegitimate group excursion into the Underground is the most daring thing you've ever done.

You had been planning a trek to the Underground ever since you'd first heard of it in Mitras. Breaking into Hange's office and memorizing maps of the local areas had been easy, and you had your route planned in no time. The adventure would be a nice distraction from the baggage of this week and from daydreams of vengeance against Ymir. Day after day, you had been reminded of your uselessness, your weakness, your destiny to fail. These pep talks came courtesy of dear Captain Levi, and more often than not in front of your peers. The added distance this trip would put between you and your tormentors was a delightful bonus.

Of course, the people in Mitras didn't even believe the Underground existed; the idea of an impoverished wasteland in tunnels beneath the city seemed absurd. Who could live like that? You always had thought it was just a legend to scare wayward children into behaving. If you misbehave, we'll lock you in the underground with all the other bad guys!

Unfortunately, Eren was currently misbehaving and all signs suggested he didn't give a damn if he would end up locked in here.

"We're here, aren't we? We might as well try it!"

Mikasa and Armin's pleading was getting nowhere.

"No, you're just going to draw attention to us!" You hiss. "Just wait till we get back to the surface and sneak some."

"But this is lava gin, (F/N)," Eren whines. "You can't even get it up there because it's made with minerals you can only get in the caves!"

You didn't realize how long you four had been standing, bickering at the corner while taking furtive glances at the pub. You also didn't realize how suspicious this might appear to people who lived every day fighting off thieves and murders. You, have high standards, and you berate yourself for not catching the massive man stalking over towards you.

"Beat it!" You hiss. It's all the convincing Mikasa needs. She grabs Armin's hand and a protesting
Eren's arm before disappearing. Just in time too. The tavern keeper lumbers into view.

"Who the fuck are you?" He demands. "And where'd you're little friends go?"

Brows furrowed, you think of every painful situation, every wrong you have ever suffered in the hopes that it will give your eyes the hardness that everyone's gaze seems to have down here.

"Not my friends. Some assholes who owed me a favor," you return. You do your best to copy his pronunciation, but your posh, clipped accent, borne from years of trying to fit in with Mitras' most privileged, will not be easily silenced. "An' it's Sasha Springer."

It's a damn creative alias, in your opinion, all things considered.

"Springer?" He grunts, turning his head to the side and releasing a lob of spit. "Forty years of bein' and I ain't never heard of no Springer around these parts."

You roll your eyes, heart pounding all the while."I keep to myself and don't bother anyone. That doesn't exactly get you celebrity status."

Try as you might, it's not enough. He narrows his eyes at you, turning to give you his undivided attention. "You an impy?"

And even your acting skills aren't enough to mask the confusion that flits across your face. What in the name of all the stones within the Holy Walls is an **impy**? That second resolved any doubts he has, and it's too late for you to run. You backpeddle as the tavern keeper takes a lumbering step towards you. Petrified, your life flashes before you; all you had wanted to do was find purpose for your life, and this is what you had to show for it. This giant may well be the last thing you ever see.

Someone snorts with derision from behind you. An arm snakes around your waist, pulling you into a waiting chest.

"This one?" He says. "Open your damn eyes. The MP wouldn't let her in if she paid them."

The voice turns your veins to ice, but some part of you is glad to see him, at least for the explanation. An **impy** meant MP. He thought you were an undercover cop with the Military Police. Of course, You refuse to acknowledge any other reason to rejoice in Levi's presence.

The tavern keeper's expression has eased into something more thoughtful. "She's with you, then, Levi?"

"She's with me," Levi vouches, bored. "Just wandered off **without permission** , is all." The last bit is hissed into your ear as cold fingers dig into your hip.

The keeper's eyes shift between you and Levi, curious. "Looks a bit green for that kind of work, don't she?"

Wonderful. He thought you were a hooker in training, and that Levi was grooming you. Which begs the question of what in the Holy Walls was Survey Corps ace Captain Levi doing here, in the dark seedy underground?


With that, the tavern keeper finally retreats and Levi seizes the opportunity to whisk you away. With a ruthless grip, he steers your through dark alleys by the nape of your neck.
"March," he snarls, his breath blazing your left ear. Curiosity prickles at you, begging you to do some sightseeing before you leave, but fear wins you. Against this grip, you're worried that turning your head even the slightest degree will result in him snapping your neck.

"You will keep quiet," he orders. "You will move as I direct you. Don't look at anyone."

You incline your head in the slightest of nods, as much as that iron grip will allow.

"Oh and one more thing."

You incline your head again.

"I'm going to fucking ruin you," he promises darkly.

Heart pounding, your mind races to strategize an escape plan. The dark buildings are whipping by you too quickly for you to have memorized the route back, in case you break free from him. With every passing second, he threads you further and further through the labyrinthine backways of the Underground. You move to dig your heels into the ground, to slow him down, but he steamrolls right over this little rebellion. In response, he silently gives a your throat a warning squeeze.

You decide he's more terrifying when quiet. You chew the inside of your cheek and remain still.

Eventually, he slows his pace, arriving at a lone building in the middle of a dark, quiet block. Levi scans your surroundings, as your eyes struggle to find what he's looking for. There's not a soul in sight. Satisfied, he unlocks the door, grip firmly around your neck all the while.

The second it's open, you're thrown inside. As he busies himself with the locks, you scramble to put as much distance between you as possible. You examine the room, hunting for an exit. You wonder if this is some sort of Survey Corps safehouse down in the Underground or if Levi is operating on his own down here, unbeknownst to Erwin. No windows. No other doors. Your reckoning is standing in the only way out.

"So is getting brutally murdered a fucking turn on for you, or do you just have shit for brains?" Levi wants to know. "Because no outsider waltzes into the Underground and expects to leave alive."

" Outsider..." Something about the way he says the word catches your attention, and fear is overwhelmed by shock. You meant to only think the words.

"You're....from the Underground, aren't you," you realize, whispering. He fixes you with a sharp stare, suddenly realizing what his carelessness has cost him. He's underestimated you it seems.

So the truth is far wilder than the rumors. Not only was he a criminal, but a criminal from the Underground. When it comes to his past, Levi has never confirmed or denied anything, remaining perpetually elusive. Even his own Squad, those he trusts his life with, admit they can only guess at his real origins. He could have been hatched in a laboratory, raised by wolves, a reincarnation, what have you; it seemed no explanation bothered him except for the truth.

"If you've figured that out, then surely you must know what I'm capable of," he says quietly. Two fingers beckon you over. "Come here."

His voice is eerily calm, a still, winter night that will freeze you to death while you remain entranced by the snow.

No way in hell were you going near that. You had been good and biddable in the streets only
because you didn't know what awaited you the next corner even if you managed to break free. Weighing the costs and benefits of ditching him in a dark street. He had been your best chance of survival. Now he was your worst.

Staying silent, you press yourself into the back wall, defiant. His hand remains hanging in the air, alone.

Clicking his tongue in annoyance, he crosses the room in a few strides, stopping just short of you. There's some space left between you two, the false illusion of freedom. "I know there are more of you brats down here. On their own, they'll get themselves killed in seconds. So Where the hell are they? Start talking."

You brace your hands against the wall to hide their trembling and say nothing.

Snatching you by the forearm, he jerks you forward. "So you're willing to just let your comrades die?"

"No one-.

"Don't bullshit me, I know they're here!" He snarls.

You can't rat them out. Even if Mikasa 3DMG unrivaled skill will buy her forgiveness, there's a very good chance Eren and Armin will be transferred at best, terminated at worst for this bout of rule-breaking. This loss would devastate the trio, if not send Mikasa packing outright, and good luck fighting the Titans then. Besides, with Mikasa on their side they should easily be back at the surface by now. Plus you're no narc!

You narrow your eyes and keep quiet. Better it be you who suffers Levi's ire rather than the only hope the Survey Corps actually has.

Suddenly, inexplicably, something in the air has shifted, just like that day in the stables.

"There are many ways we can do this, (F/N)," he murmurs, thumb stroking idle circles into the skin of your arm. "So very many ways."

The tone in his voice makes your hair stand on end, sweet and deadly, cake made with arsenic. You can't recall him ever calling you by your name before; it feels strangely intimate, a secret shared just between you two.

With agonizing slowness, Levi's hand glides up your arm, skims your shoulder, climbs the column of your neck. Delicately, he fumbles with the lobe of your ear and you shiver. He rolls a stray hair between his fingers, examining it, before tucking it behind your ear. You shiver again, although you're anything but cold, and it's all you can do to watch him. He's never handled you this way before, so very gentle, like you were a pressed flower just threatening to turn to dust.

Before you can control yourself, you're titling into his touch. It only takes a second. Like lightning, his fingers find your scalp and shoves you shrieking down to your knees. Tangled in your hair, his hand forces your head up to face him.

"Use that mouth of yours for talking, for spouting some actually useful shit," he murmurs, fingers massaging your scalp. "or I find another use for it. Your choice."

The abrupt change in tactics is fast enough to give you whiplash. Gentleness forgotten, all you can think of is survival.
"They went back, I swear they went back ages ago!" You screech. "I stayed down here because I wanted to!"

"Bullshit," he hisses between clenched teeth. "No way you'd have the balls to come down here alone."

Even after all you've accomplished, even after Hange heaping on praise for your impressive grates and improvement, he's dismissive. Eren fucks up all the time, Armin has lower conditioning scores than you, Jean constantly mouths off, and yet they all get a free pass from Levi. You're sick and tired of him underestimating you, belittling you, singling you out, and you're not afraid of letting it show.

"I had the balls to sign up for an army that holds the world record highest turnover rate!" You snap back. "No one led me down here. I found it myself."

The whites of his eyes flash in rage.

"The Underground isn't something to go visit, you spoiled little brat!" He roars, giving your hair a vicious yank to prompt another shriek. "You don't get to try on other people's lives then walk away when shit hits the fan!"

Ah, so that's what it is. Despite your rage and the cold tile biting into your knees, you start calculating. Shifting tactics. If you're correct that he's from the Underground, then it's no wonder that he's peeved. He's angry because thinks you're being voyueristic, making a tour of other people's suffering.

His suffering.

"Sir, I meant no disrespect," you begin quietly, making sure to look him in the eye. "Either to you or to the people here. But I think just going through my life totally unaware of their suffering is even worse. Selfish and self-centered. If I claim I'm helping humanity, then I owe it to these people to at least learn about their pain. Maybe then I can find a way to help."

The hand clawing at your scalp loosens itself from your hair, but remains on your head. He drops into a crouch next to you, studying you closely. You're intimidated, but continue to meet his gaze squarely in the eye.

"I know what it's like to struggle against unfair odds, judged for things beyond your control," you whisper. "My parents were the poorest in Mitras. To everyone there, I was nobody. Even after getting the top grades in the district, I was still The Tailor's Daughter. Working class. Not their type."

Giving no indication that he heard anything, Levi scrubs at his face. For a while, it's you, Levi, and the narrow, dark room passing for a studio apartment. He stands to his feet, hauling you by the waist up with him. Pulling out the one and only chair, he motions for you to sit. "You're hair's a damn mess," he laments, as though he didn't just try to scrape holes into your skull.

Fishing in a nearby drawer, he pulls out a small comb. Freeing your hair from the strict, military updo, he sets to work from behind you. With quick, soft strokes, he smoothes out the tangles in your hair. He's meticulous, refusing to leave any given section until it's absolutely, precisely flawless. The repetitive motions are almost peaceful. Tilting your head down so he can't see you, you shut your eyes, letting yourself given in to a brief moment of serenity. Swinging around to the front, he scans you, ensuring the work is to his satisfaction.
"At least now you look halfway presentable," he mutters. "Tuck in your shirt, we can't have a total slob representing us."

"Where are we going?" You murmur, running your hand through your hair. You had to hand it to him; when it came to hair care, the captain doesn't joke around.

"You're going back to headquarters. I will escort you personally, since you evidently have the street smarts of a fucking toddler."

It's a long hike back up to the surface, where you emerge at an unmarked trap door after Levi bribes the guards. From there, you continue the journey back to headquarters in silence. When you have finally arrived, you figure he'll turn around and leave. Whether setting off to take care of clandestine missions or shady underworld dealings, you can't decide. This will at least buy you enough time to grab a snack from the kitchen. You realize you've had two near death experiences today alone, and you should be grateful just to be alive, but Holy Walls the last meal you've had was sixteen hours ago and you are starving. Besides being nearly killed really tends to whet the appetite.

You never get the chance. Levi remains rigidly by your side, haunting you like a ghost. He marches you straight past the caste foyer and up three flights of stairs to the female cadet barracks. When the pair of you finally arrive at your and Sasha's room, you pause. You haven't exactly routinely been walked home by or superior and are not quite sure of the etiquette here. Fortunately, he takes care of it for you.

A hand whooshes by your cheek, dangerously close, planting into the wooden door behind you with a resounding thud. Levi leans in close, boxing you in. "Take off those damn rose-colored glasses," he murmurs. "Wake up. Because this world is going to chew you up and spit you out, and I sure as hell won't be touching spit."

You just your chin out with pride. "I'd like to see the world try," you reply smoothly, without missing a beat.

His gaze lingers on you a moment longer, before he withdraws into the center of the corridor and dismisses you. Since he's waiting for you to enter, you figure you can exploit the opportunity for info.

"Are you going to go back?" You call to him.

He narrows his eyes at you, sneering, "None of your fucking beeswax. Go get sleep. Dexterity exams are coming up."

"Good night, Captain," you murmur, opening the door and slipping in. A piercing gaze follows you until the door finally seals you in darkness.
Calves practically screaming with pain, you trudge up what seems like the thousandth hill today. The sight that awaits you, however, is well worth it.

The dawn sky is a piercing, endless blue, stretching far as they can see and marred only by a dark, ugly smudge in the distance. Perched atop this hill, it seemed to you that all that stood between you and the horizon was that Holy Wall. From here, the Titans almost seemed powerless.
Training Area Four, a fenced off forest, was a ways out of town, requiring a two-hour trek with forty pounds of equipment on your backs. Sasha had managed to sneak some extra crackers for the trip, and you envied her foresight. Once she had caught your lingering gazes, she had been kind enough to share some. You stammered out a thanks, counting the blessing in having her as a roommate.

There had been whispers, but still, no confirmation of your task for the day. The only warning was a week's notice. After two weeks of a merciless conditioning regimen and another two weeks of basic 3DMG maneuvers, you had returned back to the female barracks to find a paper posted on your door. Small, white and utterly forgettable. You almost missed it, assuming was yet another warning from maintenance staff about Sasha incessantly leaving crumbs. Artwork, she called it. As you shoved the door open, your eyes had caught a single phrase:

ADVANCED TRAINING EXERCISE WITH SQUAD LEVI

Location undisclosed.

Sign out your designated, standard-issue expedition equipment from the Shed at least two days prior to the event.

Meet Saturday in the castle foyer, 03:00 Hours. Arrive promptly. Tardiness will be considered automatic failure. Directions to the training site will be posted the day of. Finding it is the first part of the challenge.

Cpt. Levi Ackerman
Special Operations
Survey Corps

Takes a lot of nerve to demand that the entire Training Corps wake up before the sun's even risen, especially when his majesty hasn't even shown up yet. The morning air is refreshingly crisp, but nips at you nonetheless, and you really can't wait to just get this show on the road. At least movement would warm you up.

Not to mention you'd been practicing.

Hange, it seems, had a softer heart than she let on. Since you couldn't exactly best the shrimpy Captain, you'd join his colleague instead. You had begged her for 3DMG tips during her free time. While she forced you to train an extra two hours daily on top of all your other responsibilities, this
unique brand of masochism seemed to be working. While you weren't yet a human torpedo like your arch nemesis, you had improved rapidly, comfortably executing higher-tier maneuvers.

Maybe it's the sleep deprivation or hunger talking, but dare you say it, you're almost **excited** to show your stuff today.

You never were the sort of person to forget easily. Memories of your humiliation by Levi's hand on the first day of 3DMG have replayed in your mind nonstop. The snickers and bitter insults of your comrades haunt you still. No matter. Because this time, you're **prepared**.

And you **refuse** to let him successfully sabotage you again.

Suddenly, everyone around you has fallen to pitch silence, which can only mean one thing. Squad Levi emerges from the misty woods like wraiths, making their way across the clearing. Rays of light have just started to peek from beyond the horizon, bathing them in an otherworldly glow.

You narrow your eyes. What exactly was so urgent that they had to wake up even earlier than you did to get to the Training Site? The first chills of anxiety begin to prick at your skin, and you fight them back as best you can. You are **not** having a repeat of 3DMG introduction day.

"Oy, welcome to your first Advanced Exercise. Congratulations, you are the select brats that can follow a basic fucking map," Levi commends, sounding completely unimpressed.

You hadn't noticed before, but he's right. There's a handful of you missing.

He gives you all a sickening smile. "What's with those faces? Relax. We're just gonna play a game. My **favorite** game, in fact. Chickenhawk."

Chilling anxiety seeps into your bones. You and your comrades are feeding off of each other, it seems.

"You're the chickens, we're the hawks. You each get to wear one of these sexy feathers-" he dangles a bag of blindingly bright, dyed feathers "and we get to hunt you down. You have a 60-second head start, and are confined to the perimeter of the Training Area. And feathers must be displayed on your harness belt at all times, so don't get cute and stow them, you little shits. Should be simple enough, but given the audience, I feel the need to ask: Any questions?"

You and the rest of the 104th Training Corps have collectively stopped breathing. No one dares expose themselves by asking, although plenty of questions hang in the air.

"Must be dealing with an unusually clever bunch of brats this season!" Levi crows. "Get in single files for your feathers. We start in 10."

It takes little to no deliberation for you to immediately join the line in front of Oluo. Anything but his line. When you step up to claim your feather (it happens to be an eye-piercing yellow), Oluo does an excellent job of treating you like everyone else. Shoving the feather into your hand, he orders you to get out of the way, much as he had the countless cadets before you. He makes no mention of your last meeting, where you were upside-down and flailing. For this, you're very grateful. There's no doubt that Levi would have seized the opportunity to publicly thrash you had you joined his line. He had been firing snide comments all week, as if it was a public service, after all:

*Oh, you still have the balls to show after how badly you fucked up?*
I can honestly say we've never had a cadet suck so bad. Kudos.

I don't even think a Titan would eat you. They'd be too curious wondering exactly what the fuck it is you're doing in the harness.

Setting your jaw, you knot your feather to your 3DMG harness and shake these thoughts away. They won't help you now.

No, what you need to be doing now is strategizing in these final moments.

One by one, the other trainees file in next to you at the mouth of the forest. You don't have the heart to consider the worms as your comrades after how they laughed.

"Good luck!" Sasha whispers, giving your shoulder a squeeze.

Well, you suppose there are always exceptions.

"Squad members, ready?" Levi calls out. They roar back an affirmative in perfect, powerful unison. Briefly, enviously, you wonder how it must be feel to be part of such an elite group.

"Trainees ready?"

You shout your agreement, perhaps less coordinated but no less passionate.

"On 3," Levi barks. "1...."

You curl and extend your toes, getting ready to spring.

"2..."

Legs shoulder width apart, you hunker down, close to the ground for maximum speed.

"3!!!"

The sky explodes with clangs as the Training Corps takes flight. As you predicted, trainees are charging forward like arrows, desperate to put as much distance possible, as quickly as possible, between them and fearsome Squad Levi.

A foolish strategy. You allow yourself to disappear in the middle of the pack, lagging behind Mikasa but eons ahead of Krista. Whether dear Captain Levi has realized it or not, he tipped you off to an important clue. This is a 3DMG Dexterity exercise, meaning that you need to think in 3 dimensions, not two. The answer had been decided from the start of this exercise. None of you ever had any hope of outrunning a group of the Survey Corps' most elite, with or without Shadis' merciless physical conditioning. Therefore, the solution isn't to run, but to hide. Preferably, in the vertical direction.

By the time you've arrived at the darker reaches of the forest, the pack has thinned out. Crops of people have scattered and disappeared. There's still no sign of Squad Levi, not that you expect them to be that reckless, but enough time has passed that it's time for you to shift, and that one looks like it will do just fine.
Tilting your torso up, you fire two grapples to the trunk of a sturdy oak. Leaves whip past your cheeks as you ascend, rising all the way up to just before the thinnest branches. Rubbing your thighs against the trunk, you dampen the stark white of your pants with tree sap and grime. Oh, you'll keep the blinding yellow feather out, as promised. But with your uniformed mucked up, the monstrosity will look like just another leaf.

Quietly, you take a comfortable position. Let those morons duke it out below. You'll just bide your time.

You're uncertain whether to be worried or proud. Judging by the sun, it's been a solid 30-40 minutes since the start of this exercise. A few screams and unsettling thumps erupted here and there closer to the beginning, but otherwise the silence has been stretching since. Does this mean your strategy has been working as planned, or that you're missing something below?

No, you think resolutely, you're just second guessing your self yet again. Exactly the sort of insecurities he exploits to chip away at you, bit by agonizing bit. Best to remain calm and alert. The only thing for certain is that no one has taken your colored feather from you yet, which, by Levi's rules, is a good thing.

The wind starts rustling through the leaves, and you move to grab your jacket tighter around you. Except that wasn't the wind.

Silver streaks across your vision and you wrench your mouth open but stop yourself from screaming at the last second. Instead, you roll over the branch you were lying on, letting yourself drop into the sky. There's an echo of fingers on your hip, but you've already fired your anchors, bolting away.

Muscle memory kicking into gear, you leap from trunk to trunk, mind racing. Stealthy enough to be confused for the wind, he had almost slipped right past your defenses. Another second and this would have been over.

Chancing a glance behind you, your heart drops. Truly like a hawk tailing its prey from above, Levi is charging through the forest swiftly, silently and effortlessly.

Hunting you down.

Gaining.

Unstoppable.

His power is terrifying to behold. You're firing hooks out left and right to try and shake him off, but
he's doggedly pursuing you, neatly catching every turn you throw at him, as if he was the one who planned them.

Boots scraping against branches, you feel your mind begin to churn with panic. In a matter of seconds, you'll be finished. You need to think of a plan, fast.

It's the strangest sensation, how your stomach curls up to your chin. You're suddenly in free fall, before you realize the tension in your cables has gone completely slack, and the bastard hasn't gone for the feather but gone for you.

Down, down, down you go, fallen from the grace of the canopy. This time when you open your mouth, you actually do scream, pure terror ringing out in the forest as you go careening down.

It's the training; it must be. Before you can think, you're twisting like a cat and wrenching out a blade. Channeling all your strength into two hands, you plunge it into the heart of a tree and pray to the Holy Walls for hope. Slamming downwards, your descent jerks to a stop. Pain blooms in your shoulders from the rebound. Levi lands on a branch just above you with a thud.

Hissing in pain, you turn your ire towards the man who arguably just tried to kill you. "Those were perfectly good cables you just sliced off, Captain."

Levi stares at you blankly, as though he didn't just send you spiraling to your doom.

"All equipment starts out that way, brat." He lectures. "No one goes to war with a bent sword. But shit happens."

"Not all equipment is deliberately sabotaged," you return, tone venomous. Challenging the notorious Special Ops. Captain is foolhardy, you're well aware, but your rage at being sent plummeting to the ground is becoming increasingly difficult to reign in. Psyching you out before the 3DMG intro, while despicable, was not life-threatening. But this? This goes beyond routine military heckling from senior officers. And you are livid. "What will your colleagues think of a superior deliberately undermining an innocent cadet?"

Heart pounding, you prepare to leap into this verbal grave you've made for yourself. You'd rather the one you made than the physical one he's about to send you to. One heartbeat sounds, then another. Your gazes are locked and unending. There is an eerie calm about him, beautiful but hollow, like an abandoned forest.

He makes a big show of scanning your surroundings. "What colleagues?"

This gives you pause. You realize that, not only has he cornered you, but that he's driven you out far from the paths of your colleagues in the process.

There's no one else here in this sector of the forest but him.

In the blink of an eye, he swings down to your level, perched on your sword. The same blade that is precariously attached to the tree, your one and only lifeline. Despite the empty branches around you, devoid of life, his voice is barely above a whisper.
"Like I said, shit happens. Then what do you do? Tell me, princess, what do you do when you're miles outside the Walls, deep in Titan territory, and everything has gone to hell."

With that, he stomps down on the sword. The force thunders through the blade, sending it shaking. One of your hands is knocked off and you shriek for dear life.

Slowly, he lowers himself into a crouch atop your sword and pets your one remaining hand. Fingers glide down across your skin in mock reassurance. Golden, mid-morning light filters in from the canopy above, igniting a halo around him, your personal demon.

"What do you do, (L/N), hm? Do you cry?," he drawls, nudging off your pinky finger.

Eyes bulging wide, you struggle to keep your hold.

"Do you beg?" The next finger betrays you, conquered by Levi. You're hanging on by your last two fingers, and you chance a glance down. Your boots are dangling in the air, loose and purposeless like a ragdoll's legs. If you loose these final fingers, it's a one way ticket straight into the forest floor some 40 or 50 feet below.

"Or do you do what you do best, and blame someone else for your fuck-ups?"

When you look up again, his face is millimeters from yours. Eagerly consuming the emotions flitting across your face, silver eyes bore into you, bright and dangerous, like the flash of a knife.

"Goodbye chicken," he says softly, as he moves to pluck off your final fingers.

"Goodbye hawk," you whisper back.

It's then that you reveal your other hand, long since recovered from Levi's initial attack. You had been subtly working your second sword out of the grip. Armed with your back up, you willingly release the original, dropping into the dark quiet below.

When you look up, you're greeted with a panorama far more beautiful than the sunrise this morning. Silver eyes are wide, mouth agape.

He is stunned for all of two seconds before he dives in after you, furious. Again, you use the second sword to slow your descent. This time, however, you wait a bit further, drop a bit lower, until you're at the meatier part of the tree. Anchors have locked in right above you, and Levi is seconds away when you begin climbing down the tree.

It's more like stumbling, really. But through scrapes and scratches and ants and sap you have brought yourself down, dropping onto the leafy forest floor. Rolling into a stand, you taking off sprinting, shedding your now useless 3DMG gear as you do.

"What the fuck are you doing?" He demands, from somewhere above you.

Charging forward, you suck in a breath to respond.

"E-exactly w-wha-t you told us!" You puff out, waggling the yellow feather at your hip.
Cables are whizzing behind you, gaining every second, but as you learned with Hange, 3DMG isn't designed for low altitude flying. There's too much debris, too dense a cover to slip effectively through.

Keeping as low to the ground as you can, you hurtle through the trees, straight for the mouth of the forest.

*If you manage this, you'll be a legend.*

You have to admit, he's keeping great speed, swiping at you left and right, while dodging wayward branches and struggling not to get entangled.

You start to hear the chatter from your comrades, just outside the forest, and it spurs you faster.

"Unbelievable! Is that (F/N)?" Reiner cries out. "She's still in?"

"She's the last one in," Jean declares, proud.

Sasha starts singing out a cheer. Krista and Eren join her. Instead of scornful laughs, the Training Corps is rallying you to win. Squad Levi looks on, speechless.

Wheezing, you force your burning legs forward. You're getting close to your limit, and your legs aren't responding as well as they had been. The fence is racing towards you, coming ever closer, and just as you feel a cool *whoosh* from behind you, you give a final push and leap.

You're sailing through the air, arms breaking past the first chain links, when two arms lock around your stomach like talons. You're heaved upward, shooting through the air. Awe-struck faces of the Training Corps whiz by you, melting into a mess.

Levi lands you both on a low branch, mere feet from the entrance of the forest. He uses one arm to restrain you, the other to retrieve your feather.

"It's cute," says, and you can feel him smirking against your shoulder as he works the knot. "How you actually thought that you could win."

There's something soft against your hand. Looking down, you sharply inhale. At his hip lies a massive collection of neon feathers, one for every comrade of yours that fell prey to him. Trophies from his hunt. Was there even any prey left for the rest of his squad?

"Evidently, *I'm the last one standing*, sir," you reply. "I'm exceptionally proud."

Adding a final yellow feather to his gallery, he shrugs before snatching you round the belly, balancing you on his hip.

"You're not standing anymore."

Leaping down, he continues to carry you on his hip like a wayward child. You've gone from near victorious to mortified in minutes; by the looks of your comrades' faces, they are just as horrified. As soon as he's trudged out the gate, Levi releases you onto the ground.

"Tch, what a fucking disappointment. Look alive, runts we're not done," he barks. "Special Ops Squad, divvy them into groups and educate them on their mistakes. This was way too short compared to last year's."

Digging your nails into the cool dirt, you press your face into the grass, exhausted.
So I hinted at it, but just to be totally clear, Levi was never actually going to let Reader-chan fall to her death. Hence his surprise when she willingly let's go before he can remove her last fingers. He was aiming on intimidating her into submission. He was expecting her to cry out, begging to be saved, so that he can step in and prove to her how useless she is, but she flipped the script.

I thoroughly believe that if Levi were to ever actually take a partner (not hook up with or date because there are many reasons for those), actually like someone, it would have to be someone who he can respect. Someone independent and quick-witted.

Hope I didn't scare you! ;)

Chapter End Notes
Tutoring Krista in Titan Physiology, as it turns out, is pretty fun. Not just because you get to lord something over someone's head, but watching her smile break out as she learns something makes you truly feel useful.

"When exactly is the best time to counter a Titan?" you ask. Scrunching her face in concentration, Krista's gaze slips towards her notes and she hopes you don't notice.

"No notes," you declare, smacking your hand down and smirking. Perhaps you have been spending too long in the company of the Captain.

"Ummm, at night? Because their metabolism has stopped?"

"Almost, good job—but dusk would be better," you correct. "Their metabolism starts slowing down and there is enough light for you to see where you're going."
Just as Krista groans in defeat, Ymir walks in, jaw dropping. The stable incident fresh in your memory, you shoot her the sharpest smile you can over your shoulder, careful to keep Krista from seeing.

"Oh, hello Ymir. What's good?"

And you have never seen such bloodcurdling rage. Ymir's amber eyes flare and she turns on Krista, silently demanding an explanation.

"Ymir relax, she's just tutoring me," Krista placates, waving around her notes as evidence. "See?"

"Yes, relax Ymir," you purr.

Or maybe if you can't, consider going on a ride. On a dark horse, preferably. But you don't say this part out loud because you have common sense and value your life. Ymir's shaking in fury is payment enough. For now.

Arcing your back in a luxurious stretch, you inform Krista that you two have probably covered enough material for one day. You want to get your exit in early, to leave on your own terms, before Ymir has a chance to make a move.

Besides, you have to squeeze in some extra 3DMG practice while you can. You had performed well enough in Squad Levi's Advanced Exercise last week, but Squad Hange and Squad Mike would hold theirs soon enough. You had no idea what to expect, and preparation was key.

Bidding Krista farewell, you slipping past Ymir (and avoid an elbow to your ribs in the process. You might have gotten off to a rough start, but no matter. You'd own the Training Corps Ranking List soon enough. After all, you didn't reach the top rankings back in Mitras for nothing.

As you're rushing through the corridor, someone claps a hand down on your shoulder. "Well, well, well! Look who it is! Heard you were surprisingly sneaky in Advanced Exercises last week!"

Major Hange crows.

Before you can answer, two gigantic eyes consume your gaze, magnified by her goggles. "It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?" she whispers, deathly serious.

There are a few ways to react to this. What you want to do is promptly flip your shit and scramble backwards, but that would be expected, and you have a feeling that Hange hates the predictable. Plus, you really need an ally here, especially among the veterans. Aside from Sasha and Jean, the cadets have seemed lukewarm towards you, and to be honest, you don't really trust any of them. Mikasa, Eren and Armin seem to have their own crew, Bertolt and Reiner are inseparable just as Ymir and Krista are. Evidently, they aren't here to make friends, and you won't allow your naïveté to fool you again, not when there is a raging competition for the top 10 positions. Among your superiors, Commander Erwin tolerates you well enough, but remains wary. Levi outright is repulsed by you. Mike never seems to be around.

That leaves Major Hange.

"You caught me," you whisper back to her, eyes just as crazed and voice just as serious.

Instead of balking at this imitation, she tosses her head back, laughing in delight. "You are a spry one, aren't you? Where are you off to so late, anyways? Don't you know the ghosts of the Survey Corps dead haunt these halls?"

This joke is a little too dark, even for your tastes, but you press on. "To the Shed, ma'am. I wanted
to squeeze in some extra practice before curfew."

"Nerdddde," Hange drawls, rolling her eyes. "All you do is study and practice. Go make some friends. Or better yet, come help me learn more about the Titans."

"I have--"

"Sasha doesn't count. She's your roommate and therefore has an incentive to be nice to you."

"How is research different than studying?" you demand.

A manic gleam possesses her eyes as she replies, without missing a beat. "I pave the way towards the future. You obsess over details of the past."

Well damn. Seems like she actually has an answer for everything.

"How about this?" she proposes. "You assist me with some experiment designs, and I'll give you some more 3DMG tips. Sound fair?"

It's only 6PM, you figure. If you lend her a hand for the next 2 hours, you'll still have plenty of time before curfew at 10 PM. Besides, you know what they say about people you can't beat.

Hange dutifully holds up her end of the bargain. After you diligently help her define the methodology for her next experiment, Hange takes you to a small grouping of trees and coaches you through intermediate level maneuvers. Sharp turns, basic flips.

That's what you like best about her-- she's fair. No matter how brilliant she is, she treats everyone, superior and junior officers alike, with equal respect. Hange gave you her word and held herself to it, even though she could have thrown you out of her room the second you finished assisting her. Many in her position would have exploited their power to do so.

Barking both orders and encouragement up at you, Hange works you for a good ninety minutes before returning you to the Shed for a cool-down.

Well, at least that was what she told you it would be. But now, the dusty floor of the Shed is starting to swim in front of you. Your head pounds.

"Major-r Hang-ge, ma'am, h-how exactly is this supposed to help w-i-ith 3DMG?" you huff, struggling to stay upright. You have been balanced in a headstand for walls know how long, and the blood pooling in your head is starting to get to you. Hange has you by the feet, refusing to let you loose.

"Cadet (F/N), I'm pleased to inform you that this headstand pose is of the utmost importance, " Hange chirps, unperturbed. "It teaches you the most important lesson of 3DMG, which is how to distribute your weight. One wrong move and you could herniate your seventh vertebrae! Snap!"

She punctuates this with a loud snap of her fingers and a gleeful smile.

Putting aside the disturbing mirth with which she's discussing you snapping your spine, you struggle to stay focused.

"Not to mention, it gets your body used to being upside down. This position totally inverts the flow of blood in your body, and I bet you're feeling a little heady right now!"
"W-what gave it away?" you grit out.

"Ha ha! Cadet (F/N), delightful as always! Just keep in mind, the more your body gets used to inversions on the ground, the easier they will be to perform in the air."

With this sage piece of advice, Hange finally releases you, allowing you to collapse back onto the dusty floor. She claps with electrifying enthusiasm.

"Wonderful practice session! I've had a lovely time but I'm afraid I need to head back out to HQ. I trust you know where to return everything?"

"Sure, no sweat," you groan from the floor. "I'll take care of it and follow you in."

As you see her off, you roll your neck, popping the air between your bones. You'll just sit here against the wall, resting your eyes for a minute or two....

...

"Already forget what happens to trespassing, punk-ass cadets?"

Heart leaping to your throat, your eyes snap open. You don’t need sight to tell you who this is. How long had you been out? You had just finished up with Hange a second ago. Your gaze flits to the windows, which are reassuringly dark, but now the moon has crept high.

You had fallen asleep, leaving the door to the shed wide open in the middle of the night. Of course, it wouldn't escape his attention and he would sniff his way down to investigate. Ugh, you knew exactly how this must look.

Suppressing a groan, you squeeze your eyes shut in annoyance. It’s been an awfully long day, and you’re really not in the mood for a verbal (or physical) thrashing. Swallowing, you take a moment to steel your trembling fingers, before pushing yourself to your feet and facing him. "Captain Levi, sir," you salute, forcing yourself to look him in the eye. You hope the honorifics will buy you some mercy, dull the sharpness of his temper. "I was just getting ready to leave after some extra practice."

He snorts in derision. “Heaven knows you need it.”

You do your best to ignore this jab in favor of giving him your full attention. He is leaning against the doorframe, boots crossed over one another. Cold but nonchalant. It suddenly occurs to you that you have never seen him like this, after hours, with his cravat missing, collar buttons undone and sleeves cuffed to the elbows. Soft moonlight cascades down his side, painting the pale skin of his crossed arms a brilliant silver. Briefly, you wonder if this is the sight that awaits Petra every night, before cursing yourself. Disgusting, how you deify him like all those mindless fangirls even after all that he has done to you. So what? The kiss-ass redhead can have him! Captain Levi may be wrapped up all pretty, but this crude and ruthless brute hardly deserves your appreciation. Perhaps the weak-minded fall head over heels for Captain Levi, but you are anything but weak.
Drawing yourself up to your full height, you cut across the room with assured grace. You allow nothing in your stride to betray the turmoil bubbling beneath, threatening to spillover any second. Halfway across and you realize he still hasn't budged an inch. Each step you take brings you ever closer to the waiting Captain, dragged to him by a force like gravity. At the threshold he looms, leaving you no choice but to squeeze past him while minimizing contact as best you can. Sucking in whatever ab muscles you've built up, you press yourself to the opposite doorframe. Just as you've lifted one leg gingerly over his boots, you're stopped by a sharp jolt to your belt loop.

_Not_ your belt loop. When you glance over your shoulder, you find one pale finger curled like a sickle around a loose strap of your harness.

"No one gave you permission to leave, _cadet_," he drawls. The tone is enough to stop you in your tracks, even without his grip on your 3DMG harness. You'd like to meet whoever thought it was a good idea to give this temperamental, intimidating midget power and have a _little conversation_ with them.

Unfurling himself from the doorframe, Levi tugs you with him into the shadowed corners of the Shed. This is met by indignant squawks from you; how dare he drag you by a harness like some mindless livestock?!

"Did no one teach _precious_ how to work a buckle? You have _servants_ do it for you?" He coos, nauseatingly sweet.

Just as you fire up a response, he flicks his wrist, sending you stumbling forward into the center of the Shed.

"And isn't your mom a tailor, too? You're damn near _useless_," he spits.

Before you can linger on his memory of this detail, you're jarred by his next surprise attack. You choke, but not because of his words. He has dropped into a crouch at your feet, deftly taking apart the mess of straps at your hips. Jet black hair, soft like goose down, tickles your fingertips as he makes quick work of the labyrinth. Suddenly, you are possessed by a moment of sheer insanity, like balancing at the edge of a cliff and wondering what it would be like to take that final step off. What would it be like, to let your hands swim through that tantalizing hair? Just for a second. Your joints twitch, but you force yourself still. Instead, you are struggling to endure a series of none-too-gentle pulls, tugs and all around egregious manhandling. The next sharp pull sends you careening forward; by some miracle, you stop yourself just before tripping over his crouched form. _Praise be to the Walls_, you know there would be hell to pay otherwise.

You're starting to think he's doing this just to screw with you.

Desperate to regain some control over the situation, you lob the first insult that comes to mind. Looking down your nose, you drawl, "I didn't realize it was possible for you to get even _shorter_."

The second the words leave your lips you are filled with shame. That was vulgar and cruel, intended only to destroy and nothing else—all things you associate with _him_, which just happens to be the last thing on this earth that you want to become. Even in a world of living monsters, you'd like to think you'd sooner die before becoming one.

His expression says nothing. Instead, Levi’s fingers dip into the tiny crevice where the harness straps meet your trousers. The thin, flexible fabric allows you to feel every millimeter of the fingers ghosting up the backs of your thighs. Blood turning to ice, you jerk in a breath. For the briefest of moments, you feel nails biting into your hamstrings, little daggers cutting their
dangerous path upwards. It’s a sobering reminder; Levi may look harmless, crouching in front of you, but this is Humanity’s Strongest, borne of unthinkable pain and darkness. You have yet to know what someone like him is fully capable of. Although he remains silent, the message is clear: in challenging him, you have much more to lose. “These are way too loose,” he notes, tugging the lower leg loops of the harness.

“They’ll catch on shit while you’re flying, which— surprise—can kill you. How many fingers did we say should be able to slip between your leg and the harness leg loop?”

Well, it’s clearly not the amount that you left when you sized the harness. You had focused all your attention on the waist straps, and only the waist straps, because that’s what the blade holsters attached to. Honestly, you hadn’t thought anyone would make a big deal of the leg loops. Woops.

“Er, two sir…” you mutter sheepishly.

“And how many finger-widths did you leave?” he demands, unrelenting.

“….Ten, probably,” you estimate.

“Look at you, you actually can count!” he chirps in mock delight. “There should be enough room to fit two and only two. Expeditions start before the gates even open, when you first get your gear together. The path to success lies in the very first step.”

This conversation then shifts into how you overlooked the wear and tear on the straps, because good grief, dumbass these harnesses have a lifespan. You try your best to pay attention while Levi lectures on the signs that a harness should be retired. You hate to admit it, but he presents some pretty solid points.

Once the lesson is complete, he removes the harness and leaves to dispose of it. Although you nurse one hell of a grudge, you’re gracious enough to recognize sound advice when you hear it. Perhaps, the two of you got started on wrong foot tonight? Could it be possible that, inside the shriveled wretch he called a heart, he actually had good intentions? And that he wasn’t simply torturing you out of biases against your Mitras background? It’s understandable, you suppose. After all, if you had clawed your way out of the dirt and grime and poverty of the Underground, wouldn’t you hate anyone who was born into a warm home with a loving family and regular meals? You suppose he has more than earned some patience from you.

"Thank you for your guidance with the harness, Captain," you murmur. "I know you're busy and appreciate your time." Abandoning the equipment on the table, he regards you over his shoulder, brows knitting together. Panic and confusion wash over you. Did he possibly think you were being sarcastic? Good stones of our Walls, it would figure that the one time you were trying to be nice it completely backfires!

With impossible speed, you are wrenched forward by your belt loops this time, slamming into his chest face-first. Frenzied, you dig the pads of your palms into his chest, pushing back but to no avail. Levi refuses to relinquish the strap that tethers you to him. So this was yet another intimidation tactic. And his help had almost seemed sincere, too. Through no fault of your own, this man was committed to your destruction. He would not rest until he found a way to break you.

And perhaps he already has.

Because you can’t bring yourself to meet his eyes, not like this. In seconds, he has reduced you to a quivering, shameful and pitiful mess, even when you know full well that he’s exploiting your inexperience against you.
Having fallen into him, all you can do is fix your gaze onto his undone second button. Holy Walls, you have just tripped over the Captain, are pressed up against him and you're messy from practicing for hours, and this is so unfair, can he smell the sweat and what is he going to do and why isn't he moving away?!? A calloused finger hooks under your chin, capturing your gaze in his.

"Feels better like that, doesn't it?" He murmurs.

It's too late, he's done it on purpose, he won't let you look away and you're consumed by electrifying blue-gray, by thoughts of chilling icebergs, cutting their way across the silent Arctic. You tense but his hand remains resolutely at your hip and Holy Walls you swear you are close enough to hear his steady pulse, to feel the buttons of his shirt digging into your belly and to drown in the scent of lemon and cedar.

You only realize that you have been staring slack-jawed, like the epitome of cool, when the corner of his mouth slyly curls up. He is slowly moving even closer, a wolf closing in for the kill. Suddenly, you find that you can no longer use your arms, they have been pinned to your sides by a vice-like grip on either elbow. 

"(Y/N)...," Levi purrs, slow and meandering. "I've got a surprise for you..."

He drags his lips over your jaw and up your cheeks, never quite touching. A phantom. Your pulse is pounding like a war hammer, threatening to burst out of your chest any second. His mouth hovers over the shell of your ear, allowing you to feel every movement of his lips as they form the words.

"One week for trespassing. A second for breaking curfew. Stable duty."

Just before you register his instructions, Levi's suddenly several feet away from you, bored as though he'd been doing nothing this whole time but staring at the stone walls of the Shed.

You’ve been caught, and the color shoots to your cheeks in mortification.

"How dare you—!?" you splutter, indignant. The rage blinds you, brewing together the words in your mind until they are a jumbled mess. 

"One more for backtalk," he announces, distant as ever.

Levi strides past you, quick, purposeful and, most conspicuously, a good ways away from you.

"And clean this shit up."

He’s out of the Shed, and in moments, hiking down the road back towards the castle. You glare daggers at his retreating figure, which slowly disappears among the moonlit trees.

Well looks like the legends are true. Monsters do come out in the full moon.

Chapter End Notes

Short update, had to break up a chapter, otherwise have a busy spring coming up and
wouldn't have been able to update for a while.

How do you think it's going so far? Hope the pacing is believable!
WARNINGS: At the risk of giving too much away, physical violence. This chapter gets dark.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Source: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/500251471103057252/
If it wasn’t for the wiry muscle lining your arms, you wouldn’t believe that six months of training have already passed. Halfway through training. Slowly, brutally, time has marched on, with your cohort purged ever more as the weeks continue. Some people couldn’t make it past conditioning. A handful were gravely injured during 3DMG practice, if they were lucky. The unlucky ones, well, you’re just happy you didn’t get to know them to well. Others, you’re not sure whether to call them cowards or realists, but they surrendered the fight before the expedition even starts, opting instead to work in the fields.

You hate to confess that you’re being affected by the choices of others, but the dwindling numbers are making you reconsider your decision. Just a bit. Perhaps it’s just extra apparent in this awfully large classroom, but you weren’t the only one to notice.

“Weak, mindless cattle,” Eren had muttered darkly, fists trembling. "Fleeing like cowards!"

“Hey, don’t knock their choices!” Sasha piped up, punching him in the shoulder. “They are the heroes responsible for the glorious food we enjoy! Where would we be without food?”

Where indeed. What a different life from the one you had known. Food shortages are routine, and you can’t remember the last time you indulged in a warm shower. Gone were the cute bistros of Mitras, the cobbled alleyways and horse carriages and carefree days. There was a time when your only concern had been trying to impress ~the cool kids~, and when you couldn’t join them you had decided to beat them in every subject possible. It seems laughably childish now. From the capital, your mother sent you angry letters annihilating your decision-making skills every so often. Just to let you know she cared.

Someone slaps an arm around your shoulders, jostling you. “Don’t tell me Mitras’ Princess Number 2 is getting cold feet already!” Jean mocks, smirking.

You balk at this blatant disrespect. “Who’s Princess Number 1 and when was I dethroned?” you demand.

“Jealous of Krista, are we?” he singsongs, pinching your cheeks. Suddenly, Jean’s voice drops into a conspiratorial whisper. “Don’t worry. Y’know what they say, first the worst, second the best.”

Batting your eyelashes up at him, you swoon at these overtures. “Jean, that’s so cool and original, thank you so much!”

Exploiting his height, he flicks your forehead in retaliation, prompting squawks from you. He darts away before you can land a well-deserved slap, and you’re tear after him.

Or you would have, had Annie not snagged you by the upper arm and tripped Jean. With a withering look, she orders you two to stop acting like children.

“Don’t get carried away and forget what this day actually is,” she hisses.

What a grouch. Who could forget, anyways? It’s been 3 months since your last Advanced Exercise, and now the second one is upon you. In 3 months you will have yet another. According to Mikasa, this is a condensed schedule compared to those of the Military Police and Garrison training units. Unlike the other branches of the military, however, the Survey Corps is desperately in need of numbers. You’re not sure how you feel about being rushed through training into almost certain
death; perhaps these morbid thoughts are what drive you and Jean to try and lighten the mood.

Reluctantly, you and Jean return to your assigned seats. When you had first walked in, envelopes bearing your individual names had been on each of the desks. As well as a strict, bolded warning against opening the contents prior to the start of the exercise.

In typical Advanced Exercise fashion, not a single one of you knows what will happen today, only that Major Hange will be leading, and speak of the devil herself. The only information you received was to sit at the desk bearing an envelope with your name. Daring to open the envelope prior to instruction would result in an immediate disqualification.

“Hello my duckies!” Hange exclaims, clapping her hands together. While you expected to see her flanked by her Squad, you’re taken aback when Captain Levi instead makes an appearance at her right. “Who’s stoked for today’s Advanced Exercise?”

You think you speak for the entire cohort when you say absolutely No One. Except for Mikasa. Maybe. Despite the silence greeting her, Hange continues, undeterred. “Since short-stack and Shadis have been working you to the bone, I thought we’d try something different today. There’s far more to being a soldier than simply brawn. Having the sharpest 3DMG blades or biggest biceps means nothing if you can’t think under pressure. So…shall we see what you’re capable of?”

You furrow your eyebrows, tense. An intellectual exercise? But there was no way Hange would settle simply for a written test. An oral exam, then?

“Hold on Hange, first things first,” Levi grumbles. Because of course he would try and take command of Hange’s exercise. You try to suppress an eye roll. He saunters over to the left side of the class, taking his sweet time about it. His eyes remain fixated upon one point, although you can’t exactly tell where. Finally, Levi stops in front of Bertolt’s desk, remaining silent and allowing time for the fear to truly sink in.

And how it has.

Bertolt, the big, massive, bear of a cadet that he is, is shaking where he sits before the might of Levi’s crushing presence. Even from the opposite end of the room, you feel ice grip your heart.

“Cadet Hoover,” he purrs, “Do you think I’m as fucking blind as Four-Eyes without her glasses?”

His eyes are frantically searching the Captain’s for any indication of what is to come. “S-sorry?” he splutters.


Bertolt is desperately shaking his head no, but Levi tramples onward. “As. Four-Eyes. Without. Her. Glasses?”

“O-of c-course n-not, Captain L-levi sir!!”

A loud BANG breaks out across the classroom as Levi slams both hands down on the desk, lunging forward. In an instant, those piercing eyes are millimeters from Bertolt’s face.

“Then why are you acting like I’m fucking blind?” Levi hisses. “Your envelope, Hoover.” You’re not sure how many seconds of pure silence follow; you are too busy holding your breath to notice. Bertolt is utterly paralyzed. “Now.”

Bertolt is first to break the gaze, as he fishes through his pocket. As soon as the envelope has
emerged Levi snatches it, holding it up to the light. It's pristine. No torn edges, no marks. How?

“You actually had the gall to try and seal it with your spit?” Levi snarls in disbelief. “You little punk-ass bitch.”

“F-forgive m-me s-sir,” Bertolt mutters, “I j-just r-really wanted to do w-well and thought I c-could.”

The Captain fixes him with a venemous stare. Suddenly, the enveloped is rammed in Bertolt’s face. Levi seizes him by the collar, jerking him forward. The desk screeches in protest, almost drowning out Bertolt’s yelp.

“I have no tolerance for cheating, to begin with,” the Captain growls. “And now that I had to touch that filthy envelope you slobbered all over, I’ll be sure to make your life a living hell. Get out of my sight.”

With that, Bertolt is released, collapsing back into the seat. He scrambles out of the desk, nearly tripping over the envelope as he rushes out. Not missing a beat, Levi swoops down for one more assault. Scooping up the envelope, he launches it straight into Bertolt’s head. “And take your shitty forgery with you,” he roars. “A fucking insult to our intelligence is what it is.”

To her credit, Hange remains unperturbed. “Thanks for the assist, Captain Short-Stack. Now,” she murmurs, “Anyone else have anything to confess? No? Wonderful.”

As she launches into an explanation of the rules, you realize that it’s a bit like Weasel, a party game you used to play in Mitras. Each envelope contains an assigned role, either Civilian or Criminal. Team Criminals consist of 3 cadets who all know each other's identities. They will work together to "kill off" a Team Civilian member every 15 minutes. Those killed off will cannot reveal their identities once eliminated.

The rest of the cadets will belong on Team Civilians. Without knowing anyone else’s identities, Team Civilians must band together to identify and eliminate all the Criminals. Each 15 minutes, prior to Team Criminals killing someone, Team Civilian will have a chance to eliminate a suspected member of Team Criminal. Those voted off must then reveal their true identity. If Team Civilians fails to identify all three members of Team Criminals by the time the exercise ends, Team Criminals wins.

In other words, mindgames galore. Looking around you, you take in the competition. Minus Bertolt, that leaves Annie, Armin, Connie, Eren, Jean Krista, Marco, Mikasa, Reiner, Sasha and Ymir.

“While it seems like the odds are stacked against Team Civilians, there is an ace. One Civilian will also be the Informant, who will know the identities of all 3 Team Criminals members. The Criminals will only know each other, but not the Informant Civilian. You will have 45 minutes to complete the exercise,” Hange says, before her eyes take on a dangerous gleam. “And just to keep things spicy, we’ve decided to up the stakes. Each member of the losing team will suffer a drop in their individual Training Corps Rankings. By how many ranks, you ask? Well.. let’s see how merciful we’re feeling. Shorty and I will be moderating.”
Your blood freezes; not stable duty, not cleaning chores. These are actual, real life consequences. All your hard work over the past 6 months is hinging on this.

“Now, begin!”

Tearing open your envelope, you discover:

**Instructions**: Your assigned identity is stated below. Divulging this role to anyone participating in the exercise is not permitted and will be considered an automatic failure, unless requested by Squad Leaders.

TEAM: CIVILIAN

On the plus side, you were free to act naturally, unlike Team Criminals. On the other hand, Team Civilian was at a large disadvantage when it came to information. The lot of you would be leaping into the exercise pretty much blind. You fold up the paper and quickly stash it. You’re tempted to sneak glances at your neighbors, see what you can glean from their expressions, but Levi and Hange are patrolling up and down the aisles and you don’t dare deviate your gaze from the front.

“Heads on the desks and eyes shut, brats,” Levi commands. Folding your head into the crook of your elbow, you plunge yourself into darkness.

“Criminals,” Levi calls out. “Open your eyes and identify your teammates. Decide amongst yourselves one Civilian to kill.” You strain your ears but the room remains silent.

“Good. Now Criminals, shut your eyes but raise your hands. Informant, open your eyes and identify the Criminals.” Again, you listen but to no avail. Only silence greets you.

“All of you, open your eyes,” Hange calls. “Overnight, you find that criminals have, most tragically, murdered Cadet Braun”– Reiner balks at this –“which means his fate in the Rankings rests on your shoulders, as does your own! Civilians, what will you do? Remember, time is running out!”

Heat prickles at your neck as all of you begin exchanging glances; just how much can you deduce from such little information, especially when so much is riding on the outcome? The clock loudly ticks down your remaining time. Gritting his teeth, Eren's blazing gaze swivel to each one of you in turn. Mikasa hovers at his elbow, silent. Annie, Krista and Ymir linger on the fringes of the group, while Connie, Sasha and Armin remain expressionless. Arms crossed, Marco looks uncharacteristically cold. To your surprise, Jean breaks the ice. None too helpfully, you might add. Gone is his confidence from this morning, much like yours.

“Of course, they kill off Braun,” he groans. “He would have been one of the most fucking useful.”

“Quit wasting our time with your griping, Horseface!” Eren roars. At the most inconvenient possible moment, this dissolves into a shouting match between the two. Given that they’re Rank
Number 7 and Rank Number 6, respectively, you know they must be feeling the pressure. You certainly are; you have burned the midnight oil seizing Rank Number 5, and you will be damned if you are forced to surrender the fruits of your hard work. As Sasha and Mikasa move to drag them apart, Marco pipes up. “Seems like a very Criminal thing to do. Collaborating to waste a good 10 minutes with a staged fight.”

It's an interesting point; how much of this is due to cadets squirming under pressure and how much is intentional? Armin voices his agreement with Marco. Their theory certainly makes sense. On the other hand, Marco threw the first stone, and Armin agreed pretty quickly with it. This setup too could also represent a coordinated Criminal strategy.

“Little early to be pointing fingers, isn’t it Marco? Armin?” you return.

"We're not the only ones pointing, (F/N),” Armin shoots back.

In the midst of your squabbling, Reiner is shifting uncomfortably next to Hange and Levi. Much like the rest of you, he is terrified that his fate in the Survey Corps dangles in the balance, resting only on the heated debated of a handful of cadets. At least, the participants had the power to do something about it.

“The first 15 minutes have ended. Nightime has fallen. Civilians, you have not agreed upon a Criminal to eliminate, so shut your eyes. Criminals, choose your second victim!”

When you next “awake”, you find Mikasa standing next to Reiner. With the Number 1 rank in the entire Training Corps, you’re surprised she looks so tense. Regardless of what happens, she’ll clearly remain in the Top 10, after all. That is, until you catch a look at Eren, and can understand why she’s so worried about him.

Sweat beads on his forehead as he glares you all down. “This is going nowhere and now two of our best people are dead!” he snarls.

“And whose fault is that?” Jean snaps. “Admit it Yeager, you’re fucking Team Criminal!”

You look at Eren closely. Jade eyes are frenzied, darting around the group; he's always been one to wear his heart on his sleeve, so there's no way he's sophisticated enough to fake that. Eren is genuinely panicking. If anyone has truly committed themselves Survey Corps’ mission- rather than fighting for a coveted Top 10 spot for the Military Police placement- it’s Eren. Falling in the rankings would mean risking the respect of his superiors, and it would be just like him to progressively lose his cool as the situation devolves.

“Let’s start with the facts we all know,” Marco murmurs. “Mikasa is freakishly protective over Eren. Take a good look at her; she wouldn’t look this worried if Eren was actually Team Criminal, given that their team is currently in the lead.”

Annie and Ymir nod thoughtfully.

“Which would suggest that Jean is actually on Team Criminal…” Sasha finishes.

“And muddying the waters by accusing Eren,” Connie pipes up.

Jean snorts derisively. “Are you joking me? Who’s to say you two aren’t Team Criminal? I mean you pieced that together awfully quickly.”

"Well, what about Marco?” Connie points out. "He's been way more talkative than usual."
"Not all of us are used to running our mouth like you, Springer," Ymir deadpans.

Biting your lip, you mull the avalanche of accusations bombarding the group; 15 minutes have already ended and you're down 2 of your best. You don't want to make a rash decision and lose a potential Team Civilian member.

“There's no helping it. We need to eliminate Jean,” Armin says. “We Civilians are running out of time and desperately need information. Either way, the result will tell us something.”

“How the fuck does that make any sense, shrimp?” Jean snaps back. "And so convenient of you to declare yourself Team Civilian!”

“All in favor of eliminating Jean?” Annie asks. Eren, although that goes without saying. Annie, Armin, Marco, Sasha, Ymir and You all vote to eliminate Jean. Krista and Connie disagree.

"Good going eliminating a fellow Civilian! You've just handed Team Criminals their victory, morons!” Jean snarls.

“Cadet Kirschtein, time to keep me company!” Hange singsongs. “The townsfolk have elected to incarcerate you. Reveal your assigned identity.”

Trudging to the front of the room, he stands next to Mikasa before grumbling out: “…Criminal.”

Krista looks genuinely surprised, while the rest of you exchange hopeful grins. Bit by bit, you would make it through. The celebration is short lived, however.

“Lights out, my pretties! 30 minutes have passed, and night has fallen once again! Civilians, shut your eyes and hope for the best. This may be the last thing you see. Criminals, choose victim number three!"

When you open you’re eyes, you’re a little disheartened to see that Sasha has left your ranks. So the remaining 2 Criminals must be among Annie, Armin, Connie, Eren, Krista, Marco or Ymir. That's still too many to choose from, and so little details to toy around with. Since Jean was a confirmed member of Team Criminal, you opt to examine his interactions with the others. Eren was the first person he technically engaged with. You still don’t think it’s Eren, but could it be that Marco was right? That Eren and Jean were secretly colluding to waste time? You don’t get much time to ponder it, because Armin is beginning to break down. Eren's ever-progressing panic must be contagious.

“Guys please, we need to focus! We only have 15 minutes left and we have to figure out who the other 2 Criminals are to win!” he yelps out. “And it took us 30 just to find 1!”

You think back to the rules. What else can you possibly do to figure out who it is? Team Civilian decidedly is at a disadvantage, lacking information. All the Criminals have to do is not draw attention to themselves for the next 15 minutes, and they’re home free.

“Krista and Connie,” Eren growls. “You two really seemed to want to protect Jean. You both voted against eliminating him. Why don’t you just fess up?”

The pair turn their ire on him, vehemently proclaiming their innocence. "No way in hell, Yeager, though you can sure blame others like a pro!” Connie snarls.

“If they were both Criminals, there’s no way they’d purposely vote together and out themselves,” Ymir hisses.
“Why are you so intent on protecting them, Ymir?” Eren demands, wide eyes like liquid jade. “Unless one of them is your teammate?”

“She was going to protect Krista either way, obviously! That doesn’t tell us anything!” Marco snaps back.

"Well it doesn't exonerate both of them either!” Eren bellows. "Even if they're not both Team Criminal, one of them could have voted no to protect Horse-face, an the other just voted that way by chance!"

“10 minutes remaining!” Hange crows.

“Guys, we need to find them now!” Armin pleads. “We’re running out of time!”

"He's right," you step in. "We need to remain clear-headed. Let's review everyone Jean has interacted with, since we know he's Team Criminal. That has to tell us something. Plus, we don't know if the Informant has been eliminated yet."

"Agreed," Annie nods. "We don't think it's Eren. Who else did Jean interact with?"

“Marco,” Ymir replies coldly.

"Great point," Annie grunts, fixing her attention on Marco. "Y’know, I never realized you were such a great leader, Bodt. After all, it was only after you implicated Jean and Sasha seconded your lead, speaking out against him, that she got eliminated."

Ymir stares at her, stunned. "Are you saying Marco sacrificed Jean deliberately?"

Armin's eyes widen in realization. "He was fishing around for the Informant! Jean already had the group's suspicion building up against him, so pointing fingers at him didn't contribute much. But it did lure out the Informant, who knew that time was running out and that she had to name a member of Team Criminals!"

"You set her up!" Connie roars, jabbing a finger at Marco.

"And now we're out the only advantage we had!" Krista whines.

All eyes are pinned to Marco. Shit. Marco had been pretty talkative. Valid point. You bite your lip in concentration. Marco's face is noticeably pale. "H-hold on a minute! You guys are just piling all these things like they are accepted facts! This still doesn't explain why 2 people voted to protect Jean! Pretty talkative, aren't you, Krista and Connie?"

“It was early in the game and we fucked up, but we won't be fooled again," Connie snarls. "Now admit it, Marco!"

“5 minutes remaining!”

“We could always beat it out of him,” Armin whispers, blue eyes wide and haunting.

Everyone turns on him, mouths gaping.

“Are you insane?” you demand. “We can figure this out, just take a breath.”

Armin turns to you, voice cracking. His eyes are glassy, you note. "Look, it's the last thing I want to do, but he clearly knows something, and if we run out of time we forfeit our rankings! You tell
me, (F/N), what else can we do?"

“We can either beat out the name of his conspirator, or we waste our last few minutes!” Eren snaps at you. “Unless, you know that name would be yours, (F/N)? Don't think I forgot you tried to lump me in with Jean!”

“I voted Jean off, didn’t I?” you snarl right back.

“Which would provide you with an excellent cover!” Annie hisses.

"Yeah, who's to say you weren't also plotting with Marco to sacrifice Jean in order to lure out our informant, (F/N)?" Connie fires at you.

"Y-you've got it all wrong! I'm a Civilian!" Marco yells, slowly inching back.

And suddenly, your stomach drops to your feet like the time Levi sliced the cables from your gear. You feel sick; you're starting to lose your classmates. Paranoia is eating away at the remaining participants like acid. It's bringing out the darkest parts of them, those primal instincts suppressed under polite hellos and yes pleases and thank yous. It's becoming harder and harder for all of you to remember what the real goal is here. As you struggle to ward off the verbal inferno directed towards you, Ymir slips a leg behind Marco and kicks his feet out from under him in one smooth arc. Forcing his shoulders back, she pins him to the floor on his knees.

"You're talking about hurting a fellow cadet," you snarl out. "Get a hold of yourselves, you're hysterical!"

"You would just want to ride this out, wouldn't you Number 5?" Krista snaps. "Then you win!"

You've never seen so much venom in Krista's baby blues, and it halts you where you stand. Annie exploits your shock to hold you down. Eren stalks up to a trembling Marco. "Don't make me do this."

"2 minutes left!"

"W-wai--!"

Eren drives his heel into Marco's jaw with a loud THUMP, drowning out his cries. THUMP THUMP THUMP. "I SAID DON'T MAKE ME DO THIS!" Dark crimson pours down Marco's face as something small and shiny whizzes out, landing at your feet.

A tooth.

"Eren stop!" you shriek. "He clearly doesn't know! You're wasting time!"

"Does it hurt to see your teammate suffer, (L/N)?" Connie drawls.

"Someone like Marco's definitely gonna prioritize a victory over some pain," Annie agrees.

Wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand, Eren changes tactics. Despite his
protests to the contrary, *Eren looks positively delighted*. A chilling smile twists his lips. "Last chance, Bodt. Admit you're a fucking rat."

Marco emits a disturbing gurgling sound—*blood, you realize he's choking on blood!* It only lasts for a moment before there is a loud *SNAP* and infinite, anguished, blood-curdling *shrieking*.

In Eren's hands lay limp three of Marco's fingers, *broken*.

"One for Reiner, one for Mikasa, one for Sasha," Eren crows.

"*EREN--*" you screech.

"*Time's up!*" Hange declares.

The words break the spell, and suddenly you all come to, and you realize that ugly bubbling sound is coming from you. Marco lays on the for, eyes half lidded and absolutely motionless. Jean and Sasha, from their spot on the sidelines, are frozen in horror. What terrifies you the most, however, is that hardly anyone else seems to bat an eye.

"*DON'T JUST STAND THERE GET HIM HELP!*" you roar, shoving a stunned Annie off of you.

"Braun, get Bodt to the infirmary immediately," Levi orders. "The rest of you, return to your assigned seats for debriefing."

Annie offers you a handkerchief- you must have looked a mess- but you shove her hand away angrily. As you file into your seats, you catch Hange jotting your name onto the board.

**TEAM CRIMINALS**

JEAN KIRSCHTEIN  
(F/N) (L/N)  
MARCO BODT  

**INFORMANT**  
SASHA BLOUSE
"Team Civilians, in your...shall we say, fervor... you failed to officially vote for the remaining 2 members of Team Criminals. However, these were your final guesses."

Your heart sinks. This is what mob mentality gets you. Mikasa is shaking her head bitterly. It's only when the remaining class answers Hange with unanimous consensus, do the real Civilians realize that something has gone horribly wrong. This many people in agreement could only mean one thing.

"Team Criminals, Informant please confirm or deny whether these are correct?"

Jean stands. Slowly, his conspirators follow suit.

_Armin._

_Annie._

There is no fourth. Connie and Eren look at Sasha in horror, who grimly shakes her head. As you suspected, Marco was never Team Criminal. He was the Informant, tasked with the nearly deadly job of warning Team Civilians without exposing himself to Team Criminals.

There is a low, dark chuckle from the corner of the room. Levi claps slowly. "_Bravo. Arlert, I must say I'm impressed._" Levi drawls. "_You showed no hesitation. Acted by whatever means were necessary. Risked your comrade's health just to achieve your goal. Didn't think you had the balls._" Cadets murmur grudging praise around Armin, who gives a shy smile. Not one person brings up that these means involved nearby hospitalizing a fellow cadet. Jean is watching the emotions play out on your face with mild terror.

Before Jean can stop you, your hand shoots up. "Permission to speak, sir."

"Granted."

"With all due respect to you and Cadet Arlert, those tactics involved the torture of another cadet. Not only have we compromised an asset, but also violated the very oath we undertook the first day of Training Corps."

This seeming hypocrisy has little effect on Levi.

"Your point, (L/N)? The most important thing is behaving decisively in the heat of the moment, which is exactly what Arlert did by persuading you all to maul Bodt."

Your point? _Your point?_ That maybe we should think twice before breaking the fingers of our comrades, possibly? Jean's eyes will you to _please shut the hell up_, but you can't forget Marco's face contorted in agony.

"Sir, in the time it took for Marco's screams to die down and for him to refocus on our questions,
we could have easily decided on a different strategy and found the real criminals," you urge. "How can we claim to be liberating humanity if we have no problem imprisoning and torturing people? Does that sound right?"

It's evident that no one has ever pressed the Captain like this. You're not trying to be obstinate, honest, but you can't bring yourself to simply going along with Marco's cold-blooded torture. How on earth does no one else see that? Are they this desperate to impress their superiors?

"What's right isn't always what's necessary," Levi hisses through clenched teeth.

"But breaking Marco's bones wasn't necessary, that's the point!" You cry out, voice finally rising in exasperation. "Not only was it immoral but also totally ineffective! He wasn't even actually on Team Criminal, and besides, people in pain will say anything to save their skins! It's stupid to rely on their desperation. If we're so ready to abandon our humanity how are we any different from the Titans?"

In contrast to your yell, the classroom is now pitch silent. Silent enough that you can hear your ragged breath rushing out, and you're certain the rest of the class can too.

"Cadet (L/N)," Levi says, spitting out your surname like a poison. "Front and center."

Once you pitied Bertolt; now, you have become him. Except, rather than break the rules, all you did was express your opinion.

Civilly, you might add. For a while, at least.

You make your way to the front of the class as calmly as you are able. Perhaps your composure could defuse the situation.

Levi waits as you bring yourself to stand before him, then waits a little more. Silver eyes stab into you, waiting patiently for you to look up and meet them. You try your best not to squirm, but the imperious weight of his gaze makes it impossible. Only once you drag your eyes up does Levi begin.

"Cadet (L/N) here seems to think my tactics are filthy," he shares with the class. There are some incredulous scoffs, as if your classmates are saying what kind of moron would question your flawless tactics, Glorious Captain Levi?

Traitors, you think. Suck-ups! and the 3DMG introduction day clouds your mind, unbidden.

He turns his attention back to you.

"Since you have so much experience keeping your hands fucking pristine during a war, show me how it's done, won't you? Get on your hands and knees and lick my boots clean."

It takes a couple of seconds for the words to truly sink in, because you're in absolute shock. It's the height of degradation, all the more so because of who it's coming from. This raging neat-freak, who invests hours ensuring everything under his domain is spotless, is having you lick his fucking boots clean.
His lips are curled in a razor-sharp smile, deadly enough to be classified as a murder weapon in their own right. And it's just like 3DMG intro day, except now his brutalizing you is on display for all to see.

"Oi, what's with that stupid look on your face? Now you wanna play dumb? You were so chatty a minute ago."

Without meaning to, your eyes dart to Hange, incredulous and pleading. You always thought that Levi reserved your torment for when no one was watching, that he wouldn't have the gall to show his true colors in broad daylight.

"Don't look at Hange. She won't help you. No one will. Now choose carefully how you want to proceed."

Choose, Choose, the brute says, as if you had any choice to begin with! The only person with choice here is Humanity's Strongest and he knows it. Exploits it. With no one daring to question him besides you.

As though the weight of the world is crushing your shoulders, you slowly lower yourself to your knees, keenly aware of the resistance in every joint. You can feel their eyes digging into the back of your skull, those bastards who have abandoned you yet again.

Quickly, you urge yourself. The quicker you start the quicker it will be over with.

This mantra you repeat countless times. You blink your eyes rapidly, blotting out the tears before anyone can catch them. Leaning on your hands, you inch forward, sticking just the very tip of your tongue out to the toe of his boot.

There.

Done.

Before you can leap to your feet, his other boot catches you in the shoulder, driving you back down.

"I said 'lick them clean', not lick to taste the fucking leather. We're all waiting, (L/N)."

That horrible smile is still plastered on as he gazes down at you.

Walls damn this miserable, hateful, heartless midget. This attempt at public humiliation would not be forgotten. No, you would drag it to the surface every time the village children cheer his name, every time some mindless fangirl sighs lovingly after him or some insecure dolt tries to copy him. You would remind them, smash his reputation down to smithereens every time.
You would avenge this someday. But today, as your senses scream in protest, you condemn yourself to this awful fate. As his right heel dominates your line of sight, you allow yourself to dissociate while your tongue lolls forth. Had you been paying attention, you'd have notice Jean start to pipe up before Ymir ribs him into silence.

Instead, you're preoccupied. Cold bitter leather. Excess saliva creeping down your chin. Dust collecting on the cracked tiles of this room. You trace the wrinkles of the worn, dark leather with your eyes like they were rivers over a charred landscape. You're so immersed in your other world that he has to call you're name twice before you actually hear.

"Enjoying yourself?" Levi crows, eyes gleaming.

You force yourself to rise to your feet slowly. Move quickly, and it'll look like you're fleeing. You ignore Hange's and Levi's gazes even as they stare at you unabashedly, ignore the countless sets of wide eyes behind you. Damn them all to hell. You're in this alone and you'll go it alone.

You're far beyond shame now.

Just as you turn, something catches you by the elbow.

"Good look for you," he hisses in your ear. "Down on all fours like an animal."

Your body moves of its own accord.

You have slipped your other arm behind your back, out of view of your classmates, sinking your nails into his thigh like claws. I'll show you animal your nails scream as they dig into the supple flesh of his thigh. By the time you fully realize that you're technically assaulting a superior officer, you take in a sharp breath and immediately release his skin. It's every reason for him to saddle you with cleaning duties for life, if not dishonorably discharge you from the Corps outright. You curse yourself for letting him undermine your self-discipline, letting him push your buttons.

To your surprise, Levi lets it go. Nothing rings you by the nape of the neck as you quickly dart away, no one roars out obscenities in your wake. You're allowed to walk away with the feel of his flesh threatening to break against your nails. A part of you wants to chalk it up to some semblance of mercy, or maybe boredom with tormenting easy prey. But neither seem to explain off the ghost of his smirk lingering against your ear.

The remainder of the class goes off without a hitch, from what little attention you're paying anyways. Something something deductive reasoning something. Hange and Levi are acting naturally, which translates to and manic delight and cold indifference, respectively.
You don't realize class has officially been declared over until Hange asks you stay a few afterwards. As the last of your fellow trainees file out, you trudge up to the front. Levi has long since disappeared.

Hange's bespectacled eyes have never regarded you so seriously. She's going to reprimand you for clawing the Captain of the Special Forces, you bet. "I'm disappointed in you."

The disgusted scowl contorts your features before you can suppress it. She's disappointed in you? After abandoning you to Levi's ruthlessness and after she set up this insane exercise? All those times she coached you after-hours in 3DMG tutoring, all those times you helped with her Titan research, all the the easy banter between you two...you honestly thought Hange had warmed up to you. That you were her protege, and that she would stand up for you.

How naive.

"Why? Was the (L/N) boot cleaning service not quick enough for you?" You ask, voice snapping like a whip.

Hange doesn't bother acknowledging your sarcasm. "I'm disappointed that you let him win."

"Major Hange, you and I both know that Captain Levi would not have let me exit this room intact had I refused."

She cocks her head to the side like a bird, clearly seeing something beyond you. "Not one hour ago, you were willing to risk everything for your belief that torture is wrong. You had no problem challenging one of the most intimidating people in the Corps, even without a single classmate as backup. While I don't necessarily agree with you, I can respect the independence that takes."

You're not quite sure where she's going with this, and are too wary of her to get your hopes up.

"...so how did someone so strong-willed allow themselves to be manipulated so easily?"

"W-what...?" You choke out.

Then it hits you.

The damned smirk.

"Don't you see? Levi only let you walk back after you attacked him because he had already won," she murmurs, eyes devouring your reactions. "Despite what you might think, his goal wasn't humiliating you as much as it was proving his point. That anyone can be pushed to do awful things, like torture, under the right circumstances. Case in point, a polite, civilized Mitras girl snapped and attacked her superior. Not so civilized then, hm?"
For someone who supposedly never received a formal education the Captain had a knack for twisting minds. You can't believe you missed it. The boot-licking display was just the setup, breaking you down slowly. It allowed time for his whispered mocking, his real weapon, to take full effect.

Holy Walls you never thought you had it in you to despise someone so much. "And I suppose humiliating me was just an added bonus?"

Hange gives you a wistful smile. "Don't let anyone turn you into something you're not, even Cap'n Short-Stack. I know you're tougher than that, (F/N)."

Hange squeezes your shoulder and slips out, abandoning you to your thoughts and the dark classroom.

Long after you're out, you can still feel his smirk, burning into the skin of your ear.

Chapter End Notes

You've been ARMIN'D. AND MAYBE LEVI'D.

So, did you guys figure out who Team Criminals were? Those sneaky bastards!

Mob mentality truly is horrifying to behold. Poor Marco :( 
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
There are 519 cracks in the wooden rafters overlying your bunk. You know because you counted them all.

Twice.

You still can’t believe what happened, how quickly everything spiraled out of control. It started off like any other day, somehow progressing from you and Jean horsing around to an innocent cadet beaten into unconsciousness by a lynch mob, followed by that most vicious, stomach-turning display of public discipline. How did it become so insane, so very beyond your control?

“Hey (F/N),” Jean murmurs, patting your forearm. “Sasha, Connie and I are gonna grab some lunch. There’s a pub 10 minutes from here. Wanna come?”

You shake your head. You really can’t stand to look at anyone right now. Sasha’s probably put him up to this; since that day, you have been perfectly silent, leaving your room only to attend training and returning right after to sleep. Even your meals you took outside, alone. The pattern is no doubt starting to disturb her.

“C’mon (F/N), it’ll be loads of fun,” Connie encourages with a bright smile. “We never get a whole, free weekend!”

That much is true. Ordinarily, training extended for six days out of the week, with Sunday off for recovery, errands and laundry. A free Saturday was a coveted gem.

It’s bitter, but you really can’t resist. “You’re right. Maybe Marco can enjoy it from his hospital bed.”

This instantly dampens their mood. Good. You don’t know how they can simply get back to normal, like nothing happened. Connie backs away from you like you’ve bit him; you realize he’s the only one here who vocally supported it, what happened to Marco that day, but it’s not like Jean or Sasha voiced their complaints either.
Or like they stood up for you.

“Look, (F/N),” Jean begins. “What happened was horrible—"

“What we did,” you correct. It wasn’t a random accident; there was purpose, deliberation.

“What we did, Fine.” He concedes with a sigh. “But you really think this is the worst thing you’re going to see in the Survey Corps? We have no idea what awaits us outside these Walls. If we panicked under such little pressure, then Hange and Ackerman need to be aware of it so they can train us to be better.”

“Valid as those points are, it doesn’t excuse the fact that we gang-assaulted someone,” you hiss.

“So what would make it right, then?” Jean huffs. “What are we supposed to do, (F/N)? It happened and we feel like shit, believe me. But moping here isn’t going to change the past!”

“…Food?” Sasha suggests. You all turn on her glaring, before she waves her hands in defense. “No seriously! Why don’t we visit Marco and bring him some gifts to cheer him up?”

“Yeah, we could all chip in!” Connie offers.

You turn to look at them from where you lie on your bunk. This idea has promise. Putting your heads together, you come up with a list of Marco’s favorite foods. Flowers will wilt and balloons will pop, so you three figure that snacks would be the most useful gift, especially in light of the recurring food shortages. As the group of you walk out into the Mess Hall, you manage to score some extra contributions from the rest the trainees. Looks like you three weren’t the only ones feeling guilty. Krista even designs a flowery card that she passes around for signatures. While everyone is signing, Armin slips next to you. You pretend not to see him, the ruthless mastermind. He planned this whole thing, he triggered it!

“(F/N), I know you’ve been avoiding me,” Armin whispers. “And you have every right to. But I want you to know that my only intention was occupying your team with a debate over beating him, wasting your time. I-I n-ever actually thought it would go through…”

You turn your back to him and pretend to need Connie. You’re not buying it. Someone as intelligent as Armin has no right to kick off an avalanche then refuse to take responsibility for it. Perhaps he was paralyzed into inaction, but that’s no excuse. Or maybe he was simply prioritizing his Ranking over anything else. Regardless, you can respect his cunning, but you can’t bring yourself to trust him, not anymore. Once everyone wraps up, you collect the card and turn to them.

“Guys, you mind if I go get the supplies by myself?” you say. “I need the walk. Really just want to clear my head.”

To your surprise, Jean breaks out into a smile, snatching your chin and plopping a smooch onto your forehead. “Go for it,” he says, handing you the card. “Glad to see you’re feeling better, (F/N).”

Smiling, you wave off Sasha and Connie before they leave for lunch. Maybe they had been feeling just as horrible as you had this entire time, but they simply didn’t have the guts to confront of a superior officer to the face about it.

You chuckle to yourself. This is the best you’ve felt in a long while.
Good stones of our Walls, Sasha’s handwriting is an absolute mess. After several hours of perplexed staring, you think you have managed to decode most of it:

~ Sorry Lst for MaRco ~

AcaCia ho nEy

ApppLes

_____ Boyanber ry Jan _____

_____ PmperNckel B rea-d _____

_____ Roastd Wal nts _____

For the last few hours, you had been trekking about the weekend market in the village outside the Survey Corps base. After weeks of merciless training it was surprisingly therapeutic, doing something so mundane. So inconsequential. You never thought you would be so grateful for the opportunity to go grocery shopping.

Currently, you were at a fruit stand collecting the apples; all you had left was… what the heck is that? A...Acacia Honey, maybe? And you would be done for the day. It is starting to get busy; noisy, churning crowds are forming behind you so you make your final selections. Just as you’re about to pay, the shopkeeper breaks out into a delirious smile.

"What an incredible honor! I never thought I'd live to see the day!" He cries out, beckoning his wife. "Come quickly, quickly!! It's Captain Levi!"

… You can actually feel the color drain from your face.

Well, that explains the crowd. Villagers are clamoring for his attention, with desperate cries and swooning and waving of assorted gifts for him. Still, you count your blessings because there is yet no sign of man of the hour himself, and you need to make your exit. Now. Frantic, you try to catch the shopkeeper's attention. Furiously waving a wad of bills at his face doesn’t to be working; you have long since been forgotten.

"Not getting mobbed would be the real honor," someone grunts, deep voice disturbingly close to your shoulder. "Call them off, would you?"

Your blood turns to ice.
Given that *he who must not be* named is likely standing behind your shoulder, the shopkeeper suddenly turns to you, eyes wide as he makes the connection. You're out of uniform for the weekend, so it's only now that he realizes you're a Survey Corps Trainee.

"Ah, she works for you, Captain Levi sir?"

You and Levi respond at the same time.

"Yes," says Captain Levi.

"For the *Survey Corps,*" you insist. A subtle reminder that you are dedicating yourself the *organization,* not to a *person.* And least of all him.

"Please, please take whatever you need, on the house!" the shopkeeper declares, grabbing your items and neatly packaging them into a paper bag. "It's our privilege to serve you!"

As vehemently as you can while still remaining polite, you try to shove the bills at him once, twice more. You don't want anyone's charity, especially not when it's coming on the terms of your ruthless tormentor, the man who saw fit to publicly humiliate you just this past week. But, dazzled by Levi, like the rest of the crowd and just about everyone you have ever met here, the shopkeeper is not having your protests. You really can't insist he take your money for a sixth time without it looking rude, so you figure the best thing to do is gather the paper bag and disappear down an alley.

Except you have a shadow.

A sullen, vulgar, brute of a shadow who is somehow humanity's best hope of survival. "Oi, you have a fetish for sneaking off, or something? This is the third damn time I've had to come collect you."

Oh, but your answer is ready. Without bothering to look at him, you continue hiking up the cobblestoned alley. You take on your *prissiest,* most *obnoxious* voice, one that highlights your upscale Mitras accent. Just to piss him off. You call out over your shoulder, "Clause 2 of Chapter 5 within the Survey Corps Trainee Handbook explicitly states that, between 10:00 and 20:00 hours on the weekend, cadets are permitted to leave base and enter the city. I think you'll find that there are exactly 42 minutes remaining until that curfew. Ergo, no rules broken, and you're free to leave."

Granted, you completely made the numbers up, but it sounds totally legitimate. Plus, you made sure to memorize the exact hours before you left, *just in case.* That way, even if you just arbitrarily created a section of a handbook that you're not entirely sure exists, he *technically* has no dirt on you. Technically.

Levi remains silent, and you bask in the sweet glow of victory. *Glory to the Holy Walls!* You *wish* you could see his sneering little face right now as he stews in anger, but continuing to walk ahead without bothering to glance at him looks *way cooler,* so you choose to stick to that. He's not the only one who can be nonchalant.
It's then that you hear it. Footsteps trailing closely behind you.

"What are the chances that we need to use the exact, same route, Captain?" You snarl to the plodding footsteps behind you.

"PrAiSe ThE wALLs, It'S a MiRacLE."

Gasping, you swear that he's mocking you, but when you turn around, eyes blazing, a completely stoic face greets you. As if he said nothing at all. You're so enraged it doesn’t even occur to you to ask him how he knows that your parents raised you as a member of the Church of the Walls.

Just like you, he's also out of uniform today. Hands stuffed in the pockets of a charcoal suit, he leans against the side of the alley, waiting for you to resume walking so that he can resume stalking.

"Wanted to pick up some black tea," he explains, before returning to silence.

It’s clearly the only answer you’ll be getting from him, and you know it's utter rubbish. Eyes narrowing, you examine his suit. It's wool, you realize, not the cheap, mass-produced fabrics you've seen other superior officers wear. No, it's tailor-made for him, with smooth, creaseless lapels, finely embroidered pockets and topped with a stark white silk cravat. Truly, Levi spared no expense. Tea shopping in a bustling town would be a waste of such finely crafted clothes. Clearly, he was here meeting important people, and against your better judgement, you find yourself wondering who it was with, and if he came alone.

"There are no good tea shops up here," you say coldly. "You're wasting your time going this way."

He shrugs. "I like the scenic route."

There is no chasing him off then. All you can do is turn around and continue storming up the alley, gritting your teeth when you hear the telltale steps pick up again behind you. You ignore him as best you can. You only have one item left anyways.

"Better had back. It's getting dark," he warns from behind you. "You don't want to know what kind of people come here at night."

You mean like sadistic brutes who enjoy torturing cadets? Suddenly it clicks. Now that he has demonstrated his authority over you, crushed you to dust in front of your peers, he's willing to play nice. Perhaps he even feels a little guilty for that nauseating display, and is trying to get you to warm up to him as a superior officer. Break you down and then build you up, as he pleases.

How cute.

When you speak, your voice is like marble, cold, hard and immovable. You inform him that you will not be leaving because you're still looking for something, although he can leave anytime.

"Spoiled little princess," he mocks. "Can't sleep without your delicacies?"

Enough. It boggles your mind that he can be so jovial, so light-hearted, as if he didn't command you to drop to your feet and use your tongue as boot polish in front of the whole class. But Hange's words ring in your ears, and as furious as you are, you refuse to let him get the best of you again.

Whirling on your heel, you nearly smack right into him. "It's not for me, Captain, it's for the cadet
"allowed to be attacked," you snarl. "The traumatized one who will be out of commission for weeks because his so-called comrades broke his bones!"

It's slight, but you catch it; his eyes widen just a fraction. "I see," he murmurs. "It all makes sense now. The reason you were the only one who didn't agree with beating him..."

Something clouds his features, some emotion you can't name, but honestly you're too fed up with him to try guessing. You just thank the Walls you've gotten through.

"....You're hooking up with Bodt?"

You have never been a fan of his vulgar jokes, but now the crass brute has taken it way too far. Color flares in your cheeks before you can help it; he's reduced the most noble of your intentions into something crude and base and animalistic.

"How dare you, you contemptible,-!"

Levi takes in your fuming reaction with genuine surprise, which catches you off-guard. Silver eyes sweep you up and down, gesturing as though the answer is obvious. "Why else would some well-to-do Mitras brat give Bodt the time of day?" He reasons.

"Not everything is done so that you can get something in return!" You snap.

"Oh?" He chuckles darkly, eyes piercing. "Come off it, I know you people. No one means a fucking thing to you unless you can use them."

Suddenly, rapidly, he leans in, unnervingly close. Silver eyes dance with malice, gleaming like twin knives. Before you can jerk away from this invasion, cold fingers pinch your chin, digging into your jaw, as his thumb caresses your cheek. "Adorable. Never knew you were so doting. That boysenberry shit is the good stuff, your fuck-buddy will love it."

You wrench your chin out of his grasp and he lets you, allowing his knowing smirk to speak for itself. Your veins ignite with fury, chest heaving, but this won't do. This cruel imp needs to be taught a lesson, and you can't do that if you're distracted by anger. Taking your time, you wipe away the cooties he's undoubtedly left on your chin- he narrows his eyes at this, much to your delight.

"I don't know who from Mitras you have been dealing with, or why they have left you so jilted," you begin quietly. "But I never spoke to Marco before this week. Not once. Yet, I willingly risked a mob beating and confronted a Squad Leader because- rankings be damned- what happened that day was unacceptable."

You step in closer, refusing to let him intimidate you with physical proximity. Immersed in the heavenly scent of lemon and cedar that seems to follow him, you struggle to keep your thoughts on track, hissing out, "And if I had to? I'd do it all over again. Exactly the same way. Even if it was you in Marco's place. Because I wasn't defending a person, I was defending what's right!"
With your noses millimeters apart, you wait for the axe of his fury to fall. One second passes. Then
two.

*Three.*

His anger, you were prepared for. Ridicule, certainly. This? Not so much. Whether your words
have had any effect *at all* is impossible to tell. Silver eyes inscrutable as ever, he simply looks right
back at you, staying silent. You are huffing and puffing with rage, but Levi remains absolutely still
and unblinking.

You have no idea what to make of this, until you catch the golden light over his shoulder.
Suddenly, you realize that the sun is setting, disappearing over the edge of the village. He has
eaten up your precious time, and *he did it on purpose, you know he did-*

When he speaks, you have to strain to hear.

*“What??!”* you demand, still wound up.

*“Your bag is breaking,”* he mutters, and you finally recognize the jagged tears in the paper
handles. *“Give it to me before you drop everything, klutz.”*

You insist that you neither *need* nor *want* his help- many, many times- but he wrestles the bag out
of your hands anyways. Without much effort.

*“Tch, spare me,”* he snorts in derision. *“I’ve seen you topple multiple trays at breakfast.”*

Moving past you, he continues trudging up the alleyway. You watch helplessly as he disappears
with your treasure trove, the last rays of the setting sun catching his ebony locks. He’s heading
away from the base, you note. Curfew is creeping ever closer, and yet he is hiking towards the
direction you were previously going.

*“Oi, don’t just stand there,”* he bellows out over his shoulder. *“I don’t have all day to babysit you.
Now where the hell are we going?”*

You and the Captain visit a specialty sweets shop to collect Marco’s last item. After paying, you
would have taken off for the base right then and there, but Levi cleverly holds your groceries
hostage while he hunts for his tea shop of choice. You are relegated to following the choosy
Captain around the store, and he happens to want to try *absolutely everything.*

Darjeeling. Jaekseol. Nilgiri. Rize. Who knew this many types of tea even existed, let alone black
tea?

While you are bored to tears with explanations of how these leaves are cultivated (*Good Stones of
Our Walls!* *Who even has conversations about this??*), this array is apparently *still* insufficient to
satisfy the Captain. After extended interrogation of four separate tea shops, Levi finally settles on a
cannister of Ceylon, grown from the slopes of Jinae.
Jingling in the crisp night air, the shop bells bid the two of you farewell. You begin your silent, awkward trek back to the base. Are you meant to make conversation? Is he deliberately ignoring you? Sneaking a glance at him, you find Levi lost in his own thoughts, silver eyes dull and meters away from you, away from tea and away from the walls.

Everything about his world is fragile. Uncertain. Every day, he must lead those closest to him to follow him to almost certain death. Tea is one of the few indulgences he allows himself, you realize.

You walk by his shoulder, content in silence.

When you finally arrive at the infirmary, you try multiple times to lure the grocery bag away from Levi in the hallway. Clamping down on the bag, he completely ignores you, marching onwards to Marco’s room. You have no idea how Marco will react to seeing the Captain who failed to stand up for him.

To your confusion, Marco looks positively delighted to see him, and pleasantly surprised to see you.

“Oi Freckles, how’s it going?” the Captain grunts, taking a seat. “Your snout’s looking much better.”

“Thak yo, sir! Should be totally halled in toe weeks!”

With a flick of his wrist, Levi sends something careening towards Marco’s face. Your heart stops, but Marco manages to catch it last second.

“Jinae! That’s… that’s my hometown,” Marco whispers, eyes watering as he carefully turns over the tea canister. “I do’t know what to say. Thak yo so much, Cap’n!”

You glance at Levi, but he ignores you in favor of watching Marco. It astounds you just how much the Captain has learned about his cadets, without anyone seeming to notice. Marco’s hometown. Your family’s traditions.

“The shit they serve up here is like boiled sweat, so I figured it might come in handy.” Quite the poet, this one. A wandering nurse glares daggers at Levi, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“Oh, and your belligerent fangirl got you something too.” He jerks a thumb in your direction.

Thanking Levi for the generous introduction, you hand Marco the bag of goodies. Gaping, Marco accepts the bag, looking up at you. He truly expected nothing from you all, even after how abysmally he was treated. The realization stabs at your heart.

“Everyone signed you a card too,” you murmur, sharing over Krista’s masterpiece. “We’re really, really sorry, Marco.”

Levi permits you and Marco to exchange pleasantries for about 10 minutes before he barks that it’s past curfew. Marco waves you off with his good arm, and you slip out of the infirmary, into the
night.

“brat.”

It’s been a long day, and you’re grateful you at least have another day off to look forward to tomorrow. Maybe you can sneak off on a nice horseback ride before everyone mobs the stables-

“Oi, I said brat.”

Well, in your defense he wasn’t being very specific.

Stopping at the edge of the courtyard, you regard him over your shoulder. Panic tingles at the back of your neck; what on earth does he possibly want now? You’re following orders and heading back to the barracks, just like he asked. You can’t bring yourself to trust him, not like how the other cadets follow him unquestioningly. At least when you were fetching groceries with him, you had a task to occupy your mind; now your only concern is his next move.

Most of the lights within the castle are out by now, leaving only the dusky glow of the overhead torches. Levi trots up to join you, stepping into a ring of orange light. From this angle, the flames cast peculiar shadows on his face. His expression is even harder to read than usual.

“Hold out your hand,” he commands.

Immense distrust must be written on your scowling face, because Levi rolls his eyes and steps closer. Fishing around his suit breast pocket, he produces a small glass jar. Tied around the girth of the jar is a small golden ribbon.

Olives, you realize, staring at his outstretched hand. It’s too early in the year, not quite the right season for them, which means a whole jar-full would be expensive.

He must have picked it out when you weren’t looking.

“A peace offering,” he mumbles, shoving it forward.

Suddenly your mouth tastes likes bitter, old leather.

Cold tile bites into your palms and knees, your head tucked in between his heels. A thousand pairs of eyes dig into your skull, but you work diligently and you work alone, tongue lapping again and
again and again, even as saliva pools and drips from the corners of your mouth. All the while, he gazes down at you with that scathing smile and asks if you're enjoying yourself, on all fours, like an animal?

Torchlight dances on the glass jar, bathing the olives. His hand is still extended, patient.

Biting back the tears, you struggle to force your lips into a grateful smile, extending your hand forward just below his.

Levi releases the jar, into your waiting grasp.

...Except the jar explodes into a thousand pieces of glass on the stones below. Juicy olives, his delightful peace offering, roll past your feet. Your hand is tucked into your side, as if you never extended it out to him at all.

Wide, furious silver eyes turn on you, demanding an explanation.

Your gaze is positively glacial. Not even the torchlight can make your face look warm, with the expression you’re currently wearing.

“Good look for you,” you murmur coldly. “Eyes bulging like a monster.”

The echo of his harsh words to you. Turning around, you make sure to crush a couple of olives under your boots on your way out, leaving him paralyzed under the torchlight. Your mother once taught you that the most precious things in life cannot be bought or sold.

Forgiveness is one of them.
Somehow, the gift hurts so much more than the corporal punishment ever did.

Chapter End Notes

PSYCH, REJECTED. Wanted to let a glimmer of Levi's softer side show through, while still refusing to compromise Reader's pride.

Also I'll let you in on a little secret. I totally imagined Levi using the Mocking Spongebob face during the "PrAiSe ThE wALLs, It'S a MiRacLE" line. He seems like he'd be incredibly smarmy, no?

Plus, SNK MANGA SPOILER ALERT....

If you've read interviews with Isayama, then you know why having the glass jar that Levi bought shatter on the ground will be extra traumatizing for him. Brings back a certain memory ;)
Fratellanza

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Credit for this incredible fanart: マツバキ (twitter handle: https://twitter.com/a1dou3)

Source: https://deskgram.net/p/1939577173266916311_7682077048
Olives plague your dreams, pelting you in storms.

By morning, you already began to feel the weight of what you had done. Guilty, wretched, for spurning his offer of a truce. Before morning warm-ups, you wandered down the cobbled path to the Infirmary, scanning the ground with baited breath, just to see if it really happened or if, by some miracle, it was all just a fever dream.

The olives that once lined the stones have disappeared. Not one shard of broken glass remained. Nothing left to memorialize that night, to confirm that you hadn’t simply dreamt the whole thing up in a weary daze. Someone had gone out of their way to purge the moment from history of the place.

Suddenly, you despise yourself, overcome by the urge to bring your boots down on a few more juicy olives. What right does Captain Levi have, to make you feel like this? What joke of a superior-subordinate relationship is this, where he gets to brutalize you as he sees fit and at the end of the day you’re left blaming yourself for turning down a cheap ploy at forgiveness?!

All you can see is green.

As your limbs snap in-and-out, in-and-out, folding into jumping jacks at Shadis’ command, olives are all you can think of.

In the following days, it was like Levi had been erased from your existence. Not a sign of him. You would hear the cadets murmur his name of course, snickering about a particularly cutting remark he had fired at some poor soul. His name would crop up in bits of conversations from your superiors, between Hange and Moblit as they discussed resources for the upcoming expedition, between his Squad members as they recited his orders.

But no sight of gray eyes.

Heaving a sigh, you force yourself to confront the truth: Humanity’s Strongest is avoiding you. Had given up on you.

The price of your unconquerable pride. Secretly, your heart ached for it, to be accepted into the fold like the others had. He had begun to soften his stance with them, just a bit, and most of the cadets were tearing at eachother for a glimmer of attention from him. Wouldn’t it be amazing, if you too could revel in the fact that Humanity’s Strongest was your superior? If you could join your peers in learning from him, admiring him? You had left your parents and friends, teachers and cousins, everyone you had ever known back in Mitras. While your parents were never overly affectionate, you had always been praised for your hard work. Recognized for your efforts.

Here you felt invisible, lost in a sea of disposable faces.

Perhaps, if you were like the others, if you could simply learn to let things go, like soft Petra with her silvery laugh and star-struck eyes…. No wonder he hung around her so much. Who in their right mind would turn down such blind adoration?

Some people suck up to their superiors, like Petra. Others try desperately to impress them but maintain their distance, like Jean. Others still simply do only as they are told and nothing more, like Annie.

You, however, took your superior’s expectations and set them on fire. Because why the hell not keep things exciting. It brings a wry smile to your lips. No, you’re not sorry. You have no regret.
for standing up for yourself, for your morals. And if that makes you unpopular, then so be it. Because pride tastes so much better than those olives ever would have.

And so what if you’re invisible? It simply gives you more time to work on improving yourself.

You slow your pace, stopping by the Training Corps Rankings posted in broad daylight. How times had shifted from the Second Advanced Exercise. The member of Team Criminals who previously held the highest ranking among them was now awarded 1st place, with her other teammates being bumped up 3 spots each. Conveniently, the previous names were kept for the clever purposes of extra humiliation. As you scanned the list lower and lower, your blood began to simmer. The shuffle for Team Civilians was a little more complex, it seems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Corps Top Ten</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Annie Leonheart (formerly Mikasa Ackerman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Mikasa Ackerman (formerly Reiner Braun)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Reiner Braun (formerly Bertolt Hoover)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Jean Kirschtein (formerly Annie Leonheart)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 Bertolt Hoover (formerly F/N L/N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 Eren Yeager (Unchanged)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 Armin Arlert (formerly Jean Kirschtein)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 Marco Bodt (unchanged)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9 Connie Springer (unchanged)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10 F/N L/N (formerly Sasha Braus)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bertolt, who cheated, was dropped a mere 2 spots. You were the single cadet dropped down 5 spots, to the absolute bottom of the Top 10. Nails biting into your palms, you try and be grateful. After all, you at least weren’t completely dropped off the list, like poor Sasha. All that hard work you had invested into the first Exercise had saved you, but just barely.

Now that you think about it, you know exactly who is responsible for meting out these new Rankings, even if it was supposedly Hange’s Exercise.

After all, who else would be cunning enough, ruthless enough, to dangle you on a string like this?

Training Area Four looks largely similar to the last time you left it, except the leaves have shifted into bright gold and warm orange, hailing the arrival of autumn. The daylight gets shorter and shorter each passing moment; add that on to the list of resources there seems to be a shortage of.
But you rather like the chilled air nipping at your cheeks; it gives you an excuse to break out your thicker jacket, which you just so happen to look fabulous in.

Unfortunately, today is not one of the days you get to show off that gorgeous example of Mitras embroidery. You tried, but Jean wisely pointed out that it would likely get torn to shreds today, the day of your Third Advanced Exercise. So instead, you shiver outside in your lamentably thin Training Corps uniform and make sure to frequently remind an irritated Jean that this is his fault. Just in case he tries to forget.

The cheapskate Survey Corps financial bastards. You’d think they’d be a little more generous to people risking their lives, but a dark part of your mind whispers that it would be a poor investment, given the reality.

Today, Squad Mike is taking the reigns, flanked unsurprisingly by Captain Levi and Major Hange. You begin sniffing the air—for what you don’t know—until you realize that you are unintentionally mimicking Mike.

Well, this is new.

“So much tension in the air,” Mike mumbles, so low you almost don’t catch him. “Rancid.”

Hange quickly steps up to interject a note of positivity, granting you all a round of applause. “Cadets, congratulations on making it to your Third Advanced Exercise! Well done! Most of you haven’t yet had the pleasure of meeting Mike, but be honored that he is here with us today, Humanity’s Second Strongest!”

“And its number one fucking weirdest,” Levi mutters, much to the delight of the crowd. “Aren’t you, Mighty Sinus?”

A pang throbs through your heart, and you’re not sure why you feel left out of this moment. It's Levi's way of trying to ease the tension bubbling through you all, and it only makes you feel worse.

Mike ponders Levi’s question a second, before nodding with a good-natured smile. “Still better than reeking of bleach, though.”

Levi’s lip twitches up in that minimalist way of his, the closest he will ever come to smiling, as he turns on his comrade. “Unfortunately, not all of us have cave-like nostrils capable of inhaling shit clean.”

“Gentleman, let us refocus, shall we?” Hange proposes, glasses glinting maliciously as she clamps a hand down on their shoulders. “I really hate losing my train of thought.”

Levi shrugs her arm off with a disgusted scowl as she delves into an explanation of the rules. Squad Leader Mike hangs by her elbow, silently surveying you all. Since you all have apparently failed to master the art of team work, you will be shuffled into squadrons of 3 members and pitted against an opposing team. Each team will maintain its own territory and flag. The scraps of cloth are a dark marmalade color, similar to your useless Training Corps jackets, with a corresponding Team Number scrawled on. Whichever team successfully infiltrates enemy territory and retrieves the other flag—while protecting their own—will win. The matches will take place within a clearing in Training Area Four's forest. A sharp chalk line divides the clearing in two, with another vanishing through the trees as it circles the perimeter of the match area.

“Remember my duckies,” Hange warns with a menacing finger. “This is your last Advanced
Exercise, the activity with the single biggest impact on your Rankings before Graduation. Make it count!”

“So, Capture-the-Flag on steroids,” Jean concludes under his breath.

In any other situation, you would have snickered. But you can't muster it right now. Because Levi is smiling, if you can even call it that, a sharp, thin line that cuts right into the heart of you. Even being embedded in a sea of your comrades does nothing to calm your nerves, because you know this unsettling move is meant for you and you alone. You rack your mind, desperately trying to deduce just how he’s planning on using something as innocent Capture the Flag for retribution.

You should have known he wasn’t going to let this go.

“Team 1,” announces Hange. “Our current champion, Annie Leonheart, along with Eren Yeager and Connie Springer.”

They size each other up, a decent bunch. Annie needs no introduction. Eren and Connie have proven themselves talented at hand to hand combat.

You’re assuming this leaves Annie to be the brains of the operation.

“Team 1 will play against Team 2: Mikasa Ackerman, Jean Kirschtein and Sasha Braus.”

An excited hum travels through the lot of you, as Annie and Mikasa glare each other down. Not only is Eren not on Mikasa’s team, but to rub salt in the wound he’s with Annie, her rival for his affections. Add to the mix that Jean despises Eren, and blushes at the sight of Mikasa...

This will be one exhilarating match, tough to call. The teams are relatively evenly stacked. You try and give Sasha a sympathetic look but she’s ignoring you, too busy focusing on reclaiming a spot in the Top 10.

“Team 3, Reiner Braun, Bertolt Hoover and Ymir Fritz, will play against Team 4.”

There are some whistles of disbelief; it’s a stunning combination, and you can’t help but grimace to yourself. You feel so bad for the suckers who have to go against this trio of behemoths. Given that the opposing team will undoubtedly lose, this at least might boost your chances in the Rankings—

What a horrid thought. They really are rubbing off on you.

“…Armin Arlert, (F/N) (L/N) and Krista Lenz.”

The entire crowd collapses into silence. It should be silent, but your ears are ringing with Hange’s last words. Your mind descends into a turbulent mess, mouth moving but you make no sound. All you can see is that razor-blade smile, slashing into you from twenty feet away.

To fight against the most dangerous and well-respected champions in your class minus Annie, you
have been given a Walking Encyclopedia and a Human Dandelion. Unlike Teams 1 and 2, the odds are nowhere near fair. Your chance to climb back up the Rankings will be demolished in seconds.

Reiner even gives you a pained expression, head tilting to the side. *Sorry we have to utterly obliterate you.*

As if reading your thoughts, Captain Levi finally steps forward, face impassive as if he had no part in designing your demise. “To balance the odds, Team 4 will also include Marco Bodt.”

It seems Levi hasn’t lost his appetite for degradation. It’s the verbal equivalent of a one-two punch, cynically ruling that your pitiful team has no chance, and then throwing in a boy who just finished physical rehab not two weeks ago as a second thought. Begrudging and pathetic charity.

You’re not the only one who has arrived to this conclusion. Whether on Team Criminals or Team Civilians, your class remembers the *incident* following the Second Advanced Exercise all too clearly. Everyone’s eyes are on you; they have caught onto the undercurrent of the situation.

With thankful swiftness, your mind kicks back into gear. Chin held high, you accept your team assignments and walk over to stand by Marco, signaling Armin and Krista to follow.

At the very least, you *will* present a united front.

*Even if it is a union of weaklings,* a poisonous voice whispers in the back of your mind. You bite down the bile.

The first match is surprisingly quick, too quick for your liking. Too much so because it means that you are inevitably up next. It’s readily apparent that Mikasa’s singular goal is neutralizing Annie, leaving the flag-capture to her teammates. Under Mikasa’s ruthless attacks, the blonde is unable to so much as exchange glances with the rest of Team 1, much less assist. The blonde feels strangely subdued today; you have no doubt going up the former Number 1 Cadet must be a nightmare, but you can’t shake the feeling that Annie is holding back, defending herself and only sparingly launching blows.

This leaves Jean and Sasha to pair up to stave off Eren and Connie, with the flags cycling back and forth between the four for a while. Currently, Eren holds Team 2’s flag while Jean wields Team 1’s in a bitter stalemate.

It happens faster than you can blink. Even Mikasa registers it too late. She allowed herself to become too accustomed to Annie operating at a restrained level. It only takes a second, but when the blonde breaks out of their brawl in a blinding show of speed, Mikasa is caught embarrassingly off-guard.

She recovers in a heartbeat, immediately tearing after Jean, where Annie is headed to retrieve her team’s flag and assure victory.

…Except instead of aiming for her enemy, Annie dives for her own teammate instead. A swift kick to the back of his ankles slams Eren down, breath knocking out of his lungs in a loud *whoosh.* To his credit, his fingers are still digging into the prized Team 2 flag.

Piercing blue eyes turn on Mikasa without remorse. You are in awe of how Annie has the guts to stare her down. Charcoal eyes flaring and canines glistening in a snarl, Mikasa looks less and less human by the second.

“We all do what we must,” Annie murmurs. “The mission is not to be compromised, under any
circumstances. Eren understands this just as much as I do. So now, Mikasa, do what you must to protect that which you love most. Return our flag. I give you my word Eren walks free."

Although Eren is the only one with a history of attacking another cadet, this is far from an empty threat. Just vague enough to be unsettling. You remember all too well how Annie pinned you to the floor during Marco’s brutal beating. What she is ultimately capable of, you have no idea.

Jean and Sasha are assessing the hazard Annie poses as well; what would she even do to Eren, and would he willingly take a beating to manipulate his adoptive sister’s heartstrings and win?

It’s not even a debate for Mikasa; she wrenches Team 1’s flag from Jean. Against Sasha's desperate protests, Mikasa stalks forward, flag in hand.

Even if it is well-deserved, it's still brutal to watch. Heavy lies the head that wears the crown, and not everyone can handle the pressure. It can make you overconfident.

Assuming Mikasa can't both save Eren and retaliate, for example.

Mikasa grudgingly extends the dull orange flag forward, and Annie nods at Connie, prompting him to take it while she keeps Eren subdued. Just as Connie edges towards her, Mikasa helps him, jerking him into her chest and heaving him up and over. Mr. Springer has become her newest projectile in the War Against Annie. Mikasa's strength is as absurd as it is terrifying, and you find yourself laughing hysterically, tears gathering in your eyes and catching the attention of some cadets.

If this is what Mikasa can do, then what will Reiner do to you?

The blonde has no choice but to dodge the flying Connie, allowing Mikasa just enough of a crevice to dart through. Within a heartbeat, she holds Team 2's flag in her left hand, and Eren- and by extension Team 1's flag- in her right.

The match is declared over with a shrill whistle, announcing Team 2 as the winners.

Your team is asked to step forward.

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Much as the last match, each team is given five minutes to strategize prior to commencing. A grim silence has fallen over your teammates; they know perfectly well what this looks like. It's only as you are looking at the ground, drowning in these uncomfortable thoughts, that you realize your fingers are trembling. Despite the Rankings, you're arguably the best in hand-to-hand combat of your current bunch of misfits. To let them see you like this would destroy whatever shreds of morale Team 4 has, sinking any chance of victory before the match even starts.

Shaking your head free, you delve into tactics, struggling to make the most of this dismal situation. The only advantage that comes to mind is your numbers; there must be some way to milk the extra person on your team.

"We can send 2 people to retrieve Team 3's flag, and the remaining 2 will serve as a distraction, neutralizing the rest of their Team," you declare, with more confidence then you feel. "Now who is the fastest among us?"

Armin catches the wave of your supposed confidence, chiming in. "Marco has the biggest stride," he points out. "I know you're still recovering, but do you think you can handle it?"

It's still a struggle to tolerate looking at him, but you must bury the hatchet with Armin if your
Team is to have any chance of success.

Besides, you can always dig it up later.

"Not a problem," Marco assures. "I've been jogging twice a day for the last few weeks so my conditioning hasn't dropped. Wish I could say the same for my right hand. Grip strength is still weak."

You survey Armin and Krista, trying to decide how to capitalize on their strengths. Armin is cunning, stealthy and adaptable; he would best be put to use retrieving the opposing team's flag. Turning your focus on Krista, you begin to smirk, silently thanking Annie for the inspiration. Team 3 has very few weaknesses, but if there is one, it's this Human Dandelion right here.

This same dandelion that got you sent into the Captain's personal stables.

"Krista," you purr. "How about we pop over and say hello to Ymir?"

"Teams 3 and 4," Hange booms. "Please assume your positions at the opposite end of the field."

While Team 1 and Team 2 made no use of their surroundings, preferring to confront each other head-on in the most open part of the field, your team can't afford such a waste of resources. Armin and Marco will cling to the tree-line on the perimeter, stalking Team 3 until an opportunity opens up to snatch their flag. You and Krista will serve as the distractions. Between the four of you, it was decided that the safest place to maintain the Team Flag is with Armin.

Wishing each other luck, you disperse to your assigned missions.

Two minutes in, and you and your dandelion friend encounter Ymir and Bertolt. It's alarming, how quickly and silently the have managed to infiltrate your territory, but you and Krista waste not time putting up a fight. Their pairing makes sense, you realize as you dodge Bertolt's meaty fist. It's exactly as Armin predicted, and likely means that they chose to leave their flag in the safety of Reiner, the famed Second Rank of the Training Corps.

It's a valiant effort, but neither you nor Krista can keep up. Bertolt alone could have overcome the both of you. Before you know it, Ymir has restrained Krista and Bertolt does the same with you. A sea of green consumes your vision as you are shoved into the grass, dirt flooding your nostrils. A hefty knee slams down onto your back, ensuring that you won't be rising anytime soon.

"Sorry about this, love," Ymir whispers to Krista. "Hush now, it will be over soon."

Unfortunately for Ymir, Krista is in no mood to hush. Wisps of golden hair whips side to side as she viciously fights the hold of her captor. "Let us go! We're not giving up; I don't care how hopeless it looks, they still haven't blown the whistle!"

Bertolt is giving you some false platitudes, congratulating you on trying or effort but you ignore him in favor of observing the unfolding scene. This man had no reservations against cheating; you doubt softening the blow of your defeat is his primary priority and waste no time listening to him. Twisting your head up as far as it will go, you peer over at Ymir between blades of green. Even from this position, face-first in the dirt, you can tell the foul-mouthed girl's heart is starting to crumble in the wake of Krista's antics.
Bertolt notices too.

"Ymir," he says, an edge of urgency to his voice, hoping to snap his teammate out of it. "I know how this must look, but we just need to wait for Reiner to do his part. We have our flag, he just needs to claim Team 3's, which obviously..."

This revelation makes your blood freeze, enough so that you ignore the insulting implication that punctuated his sentence. Armin was certain that the flag was with Reiner. You have never seen Armin miscalculate anything. Underestimate how well a strategy might work, maybe, but he's never been outright wrong.

"Bertul, you didn't leave the flag with Reiner?" Your voice is muffled, but he catches it nonetheless.

"Well, you could say we did, (F/N)," Bertolts murmurs, large bear paw coming down to stroke your hair.

It's then you notice a bit of Ymir's jacket has been cut off, jagged ends fluttering in the wind.

The realization descends down onto you with the force of an avalanche.

"I see you have figured it out," Bertolt praises kindly from above you. "I always did respect your cleverness, (F/N)."

Somewhere, in this small section of Training Area Four, Armin and Marco are hunting for Reiner, operating under the assumption that he would be Team 3's flag carrier.

And he is.

Just not the real flag.

Bertolt produces a crumpled scrap of cloth from his pocket, a dull orange almost exactly the shade of your Training Corps jackets. A similarity Team 3 has cleverly exploited. Armin and Marco are running after a lost cause because Reiner will not be on the defensive, guarding his team's flag as anticipated. Far from it. Rather, he will pulverize your teammates to squeeze out his prize, the Team 4 flag, before reuniting with Bertolt and Ymir, who face no threat of losing their own flag.

You need to act fast. For once, Ymir is your only hope.

Your head snaps to the girls in front of you, neck straining with the effort of lifting your face above the ground. "Ymir, listen to me!" you yelp. "This is Krista's last chance to make the Top 10! She already lost the last challenge, and if she loses again there is no way she will make the Military Police! Is that what you want? To send her to her death in the Survey Corps?"

Your arrow lands precisely where you want; triumph surges through you as Ymir's narrowed eyes swivel to meet yours.

"Ymir don’t listen to her!" Bertolt pleads, tightening his grip on you. "She’s just messing with your
head! We'll win shortly if we just stay put!"

"Do the right thing, Ymir! Let Krista go! Give her a fighting chance!" you roar.

"For your own good, please shut the fuck up, hitting girls isn't my style," Bertolt hisses from above you. His voice almost makes you jump, sharp and deadly as 3DMG blades, but you are pinned to the ground. Any traces of a lovable, gold-hearted giant have disappeared. Your classmates once compared him to a teddy-bear; bear he is indeed, but more of the grizzly variety. "Krista will be fine! They take other scores into account. (F/N) is manipulating you, just stick to the plan!"

You have no time for fear. "Release Krista!" you chant, voice rising, until Bertolt snakes his fingers into your hair and shoves you back into the ground. You're glad you are unable to see his gaze when he snarls out, "Don't you fucking dare, Ymir."

"If Krista defaults into the Survey Corps she'll die!" Ymir hisses, whipping out a very sharp and very illegal to have kitchen knife from her boot, warning him him to steer clear.

So that's how they sliced off a bit of her jacket to create the fake flag. You find yourself as impressed with their cunning as you are terrified.

Bertolt’s face darkens and you almost whimper. He looks nothing like himself. You’re reminded for the thousandth time that you don’t know these people, you don’t know what they have seen and what they are truly capable of. They’re not like the kids you grew up with in Mitras, they’re far deeper, more complex with hidden layers of darkness you could never even dream of.

"Ymir," he orders, voice stone-cold. You swear you can hear it reverberate down through the knee that pressing between your shoulder blades, driving you into the ground. “Drop the knife.”

“Mind your own business and I won’t have to use it," Ymir snaps, pulling Krista to her feet and brandishing the blade at him.

Bertolt's eyes are rapidly darting between you three; he’s running the possibilities in his head. Release you to disarm Ymir, and you’ll dart away to help Marco and Armin. Allow Ymir to release Krista, and Krista will do the same.

“Alright,” he says perfectly calm. “Go ahead. Let Krista go.”

Ymir scoffs, as if this answer was the only viable possibility, and the slow dunce has finally caught up to how things should be. “Bout time you came to your senses--“

You feel the tensing in his muscles, catch his intention before Ymir possibly can. “YMIR DON’T--!" you shriek, but it’s far too late.

In the second Ymir turns her attention to Krista, Bertolt has smashed his knuckles into the side of Ymir’s chin. It’s a calculated maneuver, and she’s out like a light. Before Krista can even scream, Bertolt has taken care of her too.

Now’s your chance.
You leap to your feet but end up staggering instead. Pins and needles shoot through your limbs. Having been crushed under Bertolt’s weight for so long, your legs betray you, which is precisely what he was counting on.

He leisurely strolls over to collects Ymir’s knife before turning to face you with an affable smile, and you have never been so terrified of someone in your life.

“Like I said, hitting girls really isn’t my style,” he muses over Ymir’s and Krista’s unconscious bodies. “But…if that’s what it takes…”

Legs giving out, you tumble to your knees with a desperate gasp, eyes trained on the knife in his hand. His disturbing words seep into your very bones. You have to crane your neck to look up at him, as he lumbers over to you.

“So be good, please,” Bertolt says sweetly, continuing to smile. "And this will all be over soon. Painlessly."

Silence echoes through the forest, save for your pounding heart. The pins and needles in your legs are dying out, slowly giving way to a dull throb. Tendrils of fear curl down your spine as your gaze slips to the nearly motionless bodies of Ymir and Krista. If it wasn't for the soft rise and fall of their chests... the resemblance to corpses is uncanny.

You nod your head in agreement, a quiet, stuttering, jerking of your chin that has the muscles in your neck screaming.

Bertolt rewards you with a ruffle of your hair. "Thank you. I knew I could count on you to be reasonable, (F/N)."

His words are sweet, his smile pleasant, but no amount of courtesy will make you forget the side of him you have seen. As his shadow falls over you, Bertolt gazes out into the forest, no doubt straining to hear for any sign of Reiner.

Eyes widening in surprise, you shriek, "Krista!"

Spinning on his heel, Bertolt's eyes snap towards the crumpled bodies of Ymir and Krista, leaving his back exposed to you.

Oh yes, you are very reasonable.

You execute the maneuver in two fluid steps, jumping onto your toes and rocketing forward to wrench the true flag out of his pocket. Bertolt trails only a heartbeat behind you, whirling back.
Everything falls into slow motion. As you meet his eyes, a verdant, pure green like spring gardens, there is a searing pain erupting across your right arm. Red explodes across your vision, with a disgusting squelch that you have no time to consider, because your feet are pounding on the forest floor.

Leaves slap at your arms, wind cutting your cheeks as you careen through the forest like it's the 3DMG wires propelling you rather than your own feet. Bertolt's steps are thundering right behind you and you have no time to lose. He hunts you relentlessly, doggedly following you at every turn.

By some miracle, you finally break into a small thicket just in time to make out Reiner looming over Marco, with Armin strewn in a heap to the side, groaning.

*You have to buy time!*

With a loud screech, you call Reiner's attention to yourself.

"**GET THE HELLL AWAY FROM THEM!**" you roar.

The stocky blonde staggers back in surprise, eyes darting behind to the man about to pounce on you. Tucking in your chin, you bear your teeth and hurtle straight for Mr. Second Ranking himself. Mimicking Annie's movements, you hunker down, getting ready to launch into attack.

Reiner welcomes you with a determined glare, feet planted shoulder-width apart to bear the brunt of your assault.

The only thing is, you know you stand no chance against Reiner.

So you dive between his legs instead, dirt racing up your thighs. Momentum sending you forward, you arrive at the other side of him. Leaping up, you close the last remaining meters between you and Armin, slapping him to attention.

You know you have only a precious few seconds left.

Stuffing the Team 3 flag pilfered from Bertolt into Armin's hand, you order him to run with a shriek.

"They figured it out!" bellows Bertolt. "Immobilize them!"

You chose correctly.

With one glance, Armin has pieced it together, dragging Marco behind him as he disappears into the bushes. Reiner wastes no time hurtling after them. With Armin in possession of both teams'
flags, the three of them take off for the central clearing, where the veterans can seen them and hopefully put a stop to this. Hardly a minute passes before Reiner is at their heels.

Marco with his compromised grip and limited fighting skills, is allowed to pass forward.

He runs without looking back once.

Armin, on the other hand, is snatched right out of the air. A warm arm wraps around his belly, drawing him back and throwing him to the ground. Wind knocked out of him, Armin collapses into a wheezing fit as Reiner stalks forward.

" Trying to outrun me was a dumb move, Armin," Reiner grunts out between breaths. "I thought you were smarter than that, little buddy."

Lungs desperate to recollect air, Armin heaves out a response as best he can.

"I-I am," he says, with the sweetest smile.

Brows knitted together, Reiner says nothing, nothing at all until his gaze falls on Armin's right hand.

Then, his heart sinks, plopping down his ribs until it hits his feet. But it's too late, the whistle has already broken out. In Armin's hand lie two jagged pieces; one half of Team 3's flag, and one part of Team 4's.

"N-nothing in the rules s-says it c-can't be a p-piece of the flag," Armin croaks out. "Marco will be delivering the final pieces. M-my way of s-saying sorry."

Marco the cripple, Marco the weakling is welcomed back the champion of this round, carrying Team 4 to an unlikely victory. Eren and Jean come together, probably for the first time ever, to hoist the freckled boy over their shoulders. Connie claps Marco's knee while Sasha cheers out adoring praise. Mikasa, Annie and the veterans gape in disbelief.

You would have loved to participate in Marco’s well-deserved victory.

Jean notices it first, and immediately his smile vanishes.

There is a horrible, high-pitched screeching.

“I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean-!”

Holy WallsHolyWallsHOLYWALLS make it stop!

Bertolt is towering over you, horrified, whispering apologies.

An inferno is breaking out of your right arm, blazing up to your shoulder and swallowing your limb
whole. Cool dirt coats your back as you rock side to side, clutching at your arm in vain. You see red bubbling forth and dull, mushy, pink sinews and you can’t look it’s so gross, *Holy Walls, there the contents of your arm are just glistening back at you, shining in the cool autumn air*—

Rapid, thundering footsteps shake the ground near you as multiple black leather boots come into view. There are more and more shouts and would someone get them all away from *you just make the pain stop*—

“What the fuck is going on?” someone barks above you. “Hoover, explain!”

“I-I really didn’t m-mean to! S-she took me by supr..”

You keep screaming until it fades to black.

Kitchen knives, it turns out, can be very dangerous when used correctly. Particularly when they are wielded by a mammoth who can channel an earth-shattering amount of force into his swing. One who possibly goes by the name of Bertolt.

Sasha, Jean and Marco bring you up to speed when you awake in the Infirmary the next afternoon. The wound is long, trailing from your forearm up to your mid-bicep. It has been extensively cleaned. From the medical assessment, it is abundantly clear that your muscles have borne the brunt of Bertolt's onslaught. Your progress is uncertain. At this point, it's unclear how much arm function you'll be able to recover. The news is delivered with a home-cooked meal-- baked potato, Sasha's specialty-- and a book to occupy your thoughts.

You may lose all function of your dominant arm before ever going on your first expedition.

Interesting.

You take it all in with complete silence, only muttering your gratitude for their kindness.

"Visiting hours are over, cadets. I need to question (L/N) about the presence of contraband during the Exercise."

For once, you are almost pleased to hear his crisp voice, cutting across the din of the Infirmary. He is rescuing you from your friends' worried glances, which you have no answer to. When they shuffle out the door, wishing you well, and leave you in silence with him, you realize that you haven't directly interacted with Captain Levi in weeks.

True to form, he dives right in.

"Hoover claimed Ymir illicitly snuck in a knife," Levi begins, voice neutral. "Ymir and Krista were found unconscious on the scene. What can you tell me about that?"

Chewing your lip, you mull over what to say. Bertolt is tall and massive and hulking. Up until the
Second Advanced Exercise, he held Ranking Number 3, thanks to his impeccable physical conditioning, enviable 3DMG skill and solid grades. Eren had watched him, wide-eyed once, crowing about how Bertolt was going to help humanity crush the titans. Whether you like it or not, this is no ordinary trainee, and his physical prowess is something the Survey Corps critically needs. It's not every day someone with all Bertolt’s talents is willing to risk their life by signing up for the Survey Corps. Much like Eren, he had only ever expressed interest in this singular branch of the military.

After one demerit for cheating, Bertolt was clearly cracking, clearly desperate for a chance to regain his status. He might be some kind of sociopath, granted, but the Survey Corps has slim pickings.

As traumatized as you are, you’re not petty enough to let that fact slip by.

“Ymir did bring the knife, sir,” you murmur. "When I jumped him to get the flag, he turned around and slashed my arm. I do believe it was a genuine mistake; I don’t think he meant to hurt anybody. In terms of Ymir and Krista, he knocked them out to prevent them from running, swiftly and as painlessly as he could. I saw it personally."

Levi surveys you carefully, but says nothing. You decide not to mention Bertolt’s disturbing change in mood for now.

"I really do believe he was just desperate to reclaim his Ranking, after what happened. He simply... went about it the wrong way."

“That’s the second fucking time he’s pulled a stunt during an Advanced Exercise,” Levi mutters darkly. “Two demerits already.”

You nod absently, hoping to make it clear that this is all the information you have available. As you itch at your neck, you become aware of just what you look like. Wisps of hair cling to your forehead, soaked with sweat mingled with dirt, reminding you that you haven't bathed since the Exercise yesterday. Exhausted, filthy and mind reeling at the finding that you may never be able to fully use your arm again, you are really in no mood to engage in conversation with anyone.

Still, he doesn't leave. Squirming under his gaze, you bump your bad arm against the side of the cot and wince.

"Precious got a boo boo?" He drawls. "Need me to kiss it better?"

Rage flares through your veins. Oh, if only you had half the nerve that he does! Waltzing into your recovery room and mocking you after deliberately and unfairly stacking the odds against you! This smack-talking, sadistic midget is the very reason you're even in the infirmary.

But you know that he's trying to rile you up, that he would revel in the chance to manipulate your emotions. His hunger for control, for keeping everything and everyone around him under his thumb has always amazed you.

So you don't give him the satisfaction.

"No thank you, sir," you say, giving him a dazzling smile. "I don't want the germs."

With that, you busy yourself with the book next to you, but your pounding heart drowns out any ability to focus. A small victory, this comeback, but you bask in it nonetheless. You can’t even
make sense of the words, tingling as you are with anticipation of what he will do in response. Scowl and stomp out? Hurl an insult? Accidentally bump into your injured arm?

*Traditional Recipes of Dauper* decorates the front cover in shimmering gold letters. A cookbook.

Because of course she would.

"I can see you have plenty already, by the looks of that thing," he grimaces, nudging his chin in the direction of your bandages. "Gross."

Glancing at your arm, you frown.

*Technically* speaking, from a purely medical standpoint, you suppose that *maybe* you can *try* to concede that he has a point. *Possibly.* The once pristine bandages, now soaked in pus and blood, are a dull brown, lovely to behold. Levi invites himself to rummage through the overhead cabinets, collecting supplies.

"Did you wrap it yourself? The nurses are never this shoddy."

What a flattering assumption. What irks you the most is that it's spot on. True, you have to press down on the tape holding it together every so often. And maybe you can't move your arm at all, so as not to loosen the bandages, but you figure your handiwork gets the job done.

You ignore him, returning to the cookbook. Even as you feel Levi drop the treasure he has raided unceremoniously onto your cot, you refuse to look directly up.

Finally, he disappears from the cot. Victory surges through you, until you hear splashing from the far end of the room. Obsessive is perhaps too kind a word; for what must be the next quarter hour, he scrubs diligently at his hands, scrubs until you are certain nothing is left. Pulling on gloves with a sharp snap, he orders you to be still.

"Now give it here," he says, and you know perfectly well what he's referring to. But he’s the cause for your injured arm, just as complicit as Bertolt if not more so. Therefore, you really see no respectable reason to follow his orders. Instead, you scoot as far away from him as possible, eyes glued to the book. Granted, it takes you a couple of minutes to haul yourself across, but the scowl darkening his features tells you that your petulance has hit its target.

Inwardly, you smirk. What a *lovely* turn of events, for Humanity’s Strongest to volunteer himself and have the offer be rebuffed! Oh, you could kiss yourself! You bet he’s not used to indifference, not with his legions of admirers drooling all over him. You would *kill* to see his face right now, but you’re too petty to look up from the book.

Shrieking in horror, you try and jerk away but he holds you fast.

By your *injured* arm, to *literally* add insult to injury. You were so busy internally congratulating yourself that you failed to notice him slip around to the other side of the cot that you now occupy.

“What Cooperate and you won’t have to suffer.” His tone cuts across your whimpering ruthlessly. He may as well have been discussing the weather.

Vision swimming in tears, you glare up at him. Unfortunately, expectations of compassion are lost on this callous beast.

“Is that all it takes to make you cry?” he scoffs. “What a fucking wimp.”
Of course he blames you. Even though you have steadily improved, skyrocketing into the Top Ten of the Training Corps, his words have the desired effect, burning through weeks of hard-earned progress. Over time, his slights and sneers have crept into you, slowly chipping away at your resolve. Making you second-guess every decision. For someone who champions violence as the best form of discipline, Levi sure loves a good mindfuck.

“With waterworks like these, you might as well quit and go work on the farms. Irrigate all the fields. You still have time before the expedition, Mitras runt.”

You can’t help but gape at him, incredulous. This man is absolutely shameless. You can’t believe you almost expected an apology when he first walked in here. How naïve. Maybe in Mitras, where people actually have common courtesy, your superior officer would not sabotage you at every turn, your classmate would not flip his shit and attack you and said superior would not then barge into your hospital room and play puppet with your injured arm. But you’re not in Mitras anymore, you’re in the Survey Corps, and no one is going to break their heart over the grievances you have suffered.

The worst part about this situation is that first aid is apparently yet another one of the jerk’s many talents.

You hate to admit it, but he's actually efficient. Much more so than you struggling to apply bandages one-handed. Old bandages are quickly unraveled and discarded, before he plucks your wounded arm and places it onto his lap for a thorough cleaning. He's generous with the antiseptic, igniting your skin with a blazing pain. Hissing through clenched teeth, you jerk your arm back but he clamps down.

"Be still, I said," he mutters. "Should be simple enough orders to follow even for you."

You have little recourse but to sneak glares at him when you think he's not looking, hoping that a nurse will come interrupt him any second. The enormous dose of pure condescension that he is giving you is entirely unneeded. No one begged the imp for his medical attention anyway.

Before long, you find a new set of bandages wrapped around your arm, as neatly as if they were your second skin. Topped with a clean, square knot. He lifts your freshly bandaged arm up to the light for inspection, humming in approval. Satisfied with his handiwork.

Begrudgingly, you grumble out your thanks. Mainly because you know someone with Levi’s ego expects it. You figure the sooner you comply, the sooner he’ll bless you with his exit.

But still, he doesn't seem quite ready to leave.

It’s then that you finally catch his expression, and your heart drops, but he doesn’t notice you at all. Not when he’s fixated on your arm. Cradling it in both hands, Levi turns it around like a cipher. Moving up, he runs his fingers along the creases in your palm, tracing the lines over and over. You’ve seen this look before, seeping into his eyes the day you broke into his personal stables, that night he caught you in the Shed.
It’s raw. Primordial. Far, far removed from the cravat-wearing, tea-sipping Captain of the elite Special Ops. Squad.

The Underground has never left him.

As if Levi can hear your thoughts, sense your growing dread, silver eyes flick up to yours. Making sure you are watching, he lowers his mouth to the bandages, teeth sinking into the knot. Ever so slowly, he reels back, peeling just a bit of the cloth off with him. The cold infirmary air bites at the now bare, marred skin of your wrist. Moving with agonizing slowness, he lowers himself once more, holding your gaze captive all the while.

Cold, chapped lips press down onto your wrist.

For two seconds.

Three.

Four.

You yield your arm to him limply as your mind races, scrambling for a way to react.

Something wet darts across your throbbing pulse and you squeak-

“C-captain??” someone stutters.

So enthralled were you, so paralyzed, so utterly confused that you didn’t even hear Petra walk into the room. Neither did your Captain, it seems. Now she stands in the doorway, bearing a pile of blankets in her arms and an unreadable expression on her face.

Her eyes slip from you to the back of her superior, then to you again.

“Is everything alright?” she asks. It’s the sort of question you only ask when you know something isn’t right though, and you have no idea what this incident means for you. How much did she witness, from the doorway? What could she see? And while you were at it, what on earth was this that she even witnessed?
Had you imagined the whole thing? Is it the pain medication? The stress? Because when you look, Levi’s eyes are their usual stony gray, and you wonder if they were ever any different. He’s no longer even looking at you, head turned to regard Petra over his shoulder.

“Petra, you should have seen this mess,” he laments, brandishing your injured arm as proof. *Ow.* “She can’t wrap bandages for *shit.* It was painful to look at.”

There are more painful things than looking at your injured arm, you want to tell him. *Flopping it carelessly around, for instance.* Instead, you gnash your teeth together, and Petra finally relaxes, releasing a soft laugh. She asks you how you’re doing, voice sweet as summer fruits, and you can see why everyone likes her so much. Elite titan killer *and* kind. What a winning combination. What you can’t understand is why someone so reportedly amazing like Petra has made a life for herself following someone else around in *blind adoration.* The mission of the Survey Corps, sure, but a single, *fallible* person? It unnerves you, reminding you of the day the cadets mobbed Marco and you grimace. The head-tucked-down, follow-your-superiors-without-question mentality of the Survey Corps never sat well with you.

You can’t help but wonder if this is eventually who *you* will become.

Levi releases your arm back to you without bothering to look at where it lands. You race to catch it with your other arm, turning to glare at him but he’s already across the room, thanking Petra for bringing the blankets.

“Hurry up and drop them off, Petra,” he orders, evidently bored out of his mind as he gestures in your vague direction. “We can grab some tea before Baldy’s stupid meeting.”

You suppose he is referring to Commander Pixis of the Garrison, briefly forgetting Levi’s *rudeness* in wake of your curiosity. Did this have to do with the upcoming expedition?

Petra is only too happy to comply with his orders, gifting you the blankets with an effortless smile. They walk out the door chatting.

Without a single, additional word spoken to you.

Not so much as a goodbye. Or get well soon.

You stand corrected. There *is* something even more painful than Levi flopping your injured arm carelessly around, it seems.

You refuse to dignify it with a name.

Chapter End Notes
WHEW. Hi y'all! ENORMOUS thank you to everyone taking the time to read/ comment/ leave kudos/ bookmark; I deliberate over a lot that goes on within the story so the feedback is heartwarming. I had some deadlines for school that I conveniently put off until the last minute, so I couldn't make an appearance until now, but I definitely wanted to take the time to respond to comments individually as well as thank you lovely Readers here!

Massive chapter, but this all went together narratively, so hopefully it wasn't too long of a read and it was worth the wait! My baby Marco is a hero ❤

More importantly, I wonder what Levi wants with your arm, the secret perv (°_°)

Wow, thank you so much everyone for all the support <3!! It warms my heart that you're enjoying this story! School is starting to pick up pace, so I'm sorry if takes a while to respond to your comments. But know that they mean a tremendous amount to me, and that I will absolutely reply, although it might take me some time.

Without further ado, enjoy the latest installment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"Alright m'dear, you're finally stable enough for dischar-
"

The Head Nurse has hardly finished speaking by the time you flee the Infirmary, tearing down the halls with the blinding speed of Sasha having spotted a slab of meat. Good riddance. Granted, the medical team tended to your wound with a level of devotion that surprised you, and you'd make sure to send a thank you bouquet for later. But Good Walls, how you despised the place. Drab, sterile white walls. The moaning patients. Everyone poking and prodding at you at odd hours of
the day, asking you to rotate your wrist and lift your arm up vertically, now horizontally over and over and over.

You shudder. Four days was long enough.

Much as they did for Marco, the Squad Leaders have designed a specialized training schedule for you to accommodate your condition. You will be immersed in physical rehabilitation twice a day for the next 3 months with the goal of building strength and mobility in your right arm; the doctor had told you the earlier you begin therapy, the greater the yield would be in terms of regaining function. You take it to heart, arriving early to the rehab sessions and badgering your overworked therapist with incessant questions.

"Am I doing this right?"

"Do most people recover when their classmate spazzes out and stabs them in the arm?"

"Should I be doing these exercises three times per day? Like when I get back to the barracks? Are you rolling your eyes? Why?"

"In your expert opinion, where does Captain Levi fall on a scale of 1 to ass?"

....Okay, so perhaps the last one you didn't have the courage to ask out loud. But you're sure he caught your intention by how you tensed anytime someone mentioned the notorious captain's name.

When you're not in rehab, you rejoin the cadets for physical conditioning days, focusing on maintaining your endurance. Use of 3DMG gear is expressly forbidden, however; you watch with burning envy as they sail through the canopies while you trudge back to rehab. Seeing your classmates steadily improve is bittersweet; you're happy for them, but you can't quell the anxiety that you will get left behind.

3 months with limited access to 3DMG is a long time. Eventually, Hange permits you to practice slicing a stable target with your left arm. So while your classmates are performing aerial flips, undertaking advanced maneuvers, you hack away at a stump of wood, generating firewood for the upcoming winter. In your unbiased opinion, it's the nicest, most exquisitely-cut firewood to ever have graced the Survey Corps.

They're welcome.

By the time the 3 months have drawn to a close, fresh snow coats the castle. For the first time in nearly a year, the Training Corps will be granted a break. Some of you are fortunate to have families who survived the massacre at the hands of the Titans. Those who are able, immediately set out to spend the holidays with family. For those without families, or those without the means to travel, the Survey Corps will keep the castle open during break.

Somehow, your mother has sniffed out the schedule and bombarded you with letters demanding to know when you will be coming home and whether she should prepare your favorite, and also you had better be getting enough sleep. You contemplate going back to Mitras; fortunately, you have both the family and the means to see them. But you can't bring yourself to face your mother. Not after that day, the final day of rehab, when your doctor told you in no uncertain terms that nothing else could be done. This was the best your arm could get.
This. A mediocre, pitiful caliber that's maybe 70% of your original function, at best. What that translates to is a weaker grip strength (how will you hold the blades?), difficulty repeatedly twisting your arm (how will you slice the Titans?) and restricted arm movements overall (how will you fire the 3DMG cables?).

Twelve weeks of you being the most determined, most meticulous and perhaps most obnoxious rehab patient that your therapist has ever seen, all for a mere 70%.

So instead, you write your mother and tell her you're ill; not a serious illness- or she'll work herself into a frenzy and come barging down here to see you for herself, but enough to keep you bedridden and contagious. You do end up feeling bad when she smotheres you with care package, after care package, especially when the only cadets remaining on the base right now either are orphans or impoverished, or both. Care packages are out of the question for them.

To stanch their envy and questions, you share the treats. You haven't told anyone the truth; you can barely stomach the news yourself, so the idea of informing Commander Erwin, not to mention Major Hange or Captain Levi, is left to fester in the darkest corners of your mind. It's content to stay there for a while, stewing absenty.

Today, however, it finally reawakens from hibernation to terrorize you.

Because it's Captain Levi's birthday this week.

Naturally, this means the Squad Leaders and cadets have seen fit to organize festivities for the glorious occasion. Primarily, because there is nothing else to do around base, but you suppose idle hands are better than injured ones.

And what better way, Hange wonders, to celebrate this little ray of sunshine's birthday than with a talent show! You and Annie exchange glances but remain quiet. Either Hange has the social grace of an aberrant Titan, or she really must dislike Captain Levi.

Before Annie has the chance to snag the spot, you immediately volunteer yourself as Stage Manager. The less you have to be in the limelight tonight, the better.

As the days progress, your troupe of minstrels has amassed a pretty good set of acts. Eren and Jean will be parodying the Squad Leaders (at their own peril). Sasha will be playing a traditional lute from Dauper, Krista will regale the audience with her singing, and finally, Reiner, Bertolt and Connie will be performing gymnastic feats. Armin will be the Master of Ceremonies, while Mikasa and Annie will cover all props, lighting and equipment needed.

Does Captain Dead Eyes even deserve all this?

Oops. Turned out you asked this particular question out loud. You only realize that you muttered it when Mikasa drives an elbow into your ribs, knocking the wind from you.

When the national holiday that is evidently Levi's birthday finally arrives, there is a palpable mirth in a castle that has seemed hollow and silent over the last few days. Despite the food shortages, the Squad Leaders have pulled together a delectable feast in the rarely-ever-used lounge room. The room is basically code for a worn, old couch and few bookcases, but calling it the lounge room gives the illusion of luxury. When Levi finally enters, he is dogged by a gaggle of excited Squad-mates already placing bets on who will black out first. Although alcohol is generally allowed on base only to veterans on certain occasions, the Squad Leaders permit the
cadets to try the champagne, although you pass up the offer. You've always been a lightweight, and you don't want to let your guard down around him, no matter how many other people are in the room to cover you. A pang hits you as you wonder how much this must cost Mike and Hange; certainly, the Survey Corps wouldn't cover this. It must be out of their own pockets.

The much-awaited Talent Show goes off without a hitch. Mainly because Annie is glaring at the acts to ensure prompt turnover. You hang on the wings, keeping mostly to yourself and voicing directions to the performers or stage crew when necessary.

For his part, Levi is tolerating the clearly unwanted attention. His throne is the squeaking couch in the center of the room, with the veterans surrounding him in glee. Petra, you note, sits closest to him. Not on the couch, but as close as she can next to it. Oluo, Moblit and Gunther roar in laughter when Eren has the gall to imitate the sniffing Mike. You have to admit, Jean makes a pretty convincing Hange.

Almost too convincing.

As the final act draws to a close, the crowd of drunk veterans erupts into fevered cheers. At this point, you think they will clap for anything, but you appreciate the enthusiasm nonetheless. You watch from the furthest corner of the room as the performers take their bows, followed by stage crew. You're planning on sitting this one out, but Jean, Eren and Connie begin yowling your name. Pressured to join in, you stalk onstage and take a quick bow before darting away.

"SPEECH! SPEECH!" Oluo hollers, riling everyone in the room into a chant. Everyone, it seems, is eager to hear what Captain Levi has to say.

Rolling his eyes, Levi stands to his feet and raises his glass. Instantly, the crowd submerges into silence.

"Every so often, I wonder what the fuck it is I'm actually doing here. Why I bother going outside the Walls for yet another expedition, every time returning with fewer soldiers, rising casualties and no satisfying answers. Tonight, as I look around at your faces, I realize that we'll be unbelievably fucking lucky if I get to see even half of you again after this."

Someone gulps audibly, and it would be almost strangely comical if Levi's words weren't so very chilling.

"So why do I journey outside the Walls? Because you show me a humanity worth fighting for. When we're far away from the cover of the stones, Titans snapping at our heels, this is what I will be thinking of. Your smiles. Your warmth. Your light, that chases away the miserable darkness, the shadows cast on us by those damn Walls. You are why I will gladly slay Titans till the last breath I take on this accursed world."

It's an unexpected vulnerability, one that has absolutely mesmerized the crowd, yourself included. No one moves, no one dares take in a breath. All you can do is gape in bleak awe at the dauntless Captain.

"Now, kindly bugger the fuck off and take Oluo with you, because he smells like shit and there's only so far I can lean away from him. Also, thanks everyone."

Laughter breaks out across the room, easing the tension. veterans, While the veterans bid each other farewell, the cadets stay behind to clean the lounge up. Once that's done, Hange assigns you all a 1-kilometer jog followed by 3-cool down sets before retiring for the evening, trusting that the Training Corps will carry out her orders.
And you do.

Well, at least the jog part. While your comrades begin the the cool-down sets in the empty outdoor courtyard, you slip away into the night. Wandering into the kitchen, you pour yourself some warm milk before continuing your trek around the castle. As you cut through the balcony, you watch your comrades from above. Reiner is leading the charge, barking orders as the rest follow his cool-down instructions. They keep impeccable time, working together like the finely oiled cogs that pull the riverboats up twoards Mitras. Incredible, how far they have all come.

**Incredible and nerve-wracking.**

You have no idea where you will possibly stack in the final Rankings; no new posts have been made available by the Squad Leaders. So instead, you keep walking, your dark thoughts and the silent castle stones you're only companion. Shivering at the dropping temperature, you move to wrap your jacket around you, which is when you realize you must have left it at the lounge. In your exhausted and morbid stupor, it takes you another 20 minutes to backtrack and find the corridor outside the lounge, where you find Petra.

“Hi (F/N)! What are you up to so late?” Petra chirps, greeting you with a smile that you return.

“Evening Petra. Just forgot my jacket in the lounge. Was gonna grab it and head back to bed.”

Her smile falters by just a bit, a portrait hung crooked ever so slightly, but you manage to detect it nonetheless.

“Ah, I’m happy to fetch it for you!” the redhead volunteers. “You must be exhausted. Just wait right here and I’ll go get it.” While the groomed Mitras lady in you would normally delight at such a courtesy, your instincts nag that she isn’t simply doing you a favor. Why would she, when she hardly even knows you?

“Thank you, that's very kind,” you reply, smile still in place. “But I wouldn’t want to trouble you. I remember where I left it.” You make to sidestep her, but she persists.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all! Just let me know where you left it and I'll take care of it."

The nagging voice in your mind grows louder at Petra’s sugar-coated insistence. "That's quite alright, thank you so much."

You have barely finished thanking her when she pushes out her next sentence. "Captain Levi is still in there. Shall we go together?"

**Ah.**

When you turn to regard her fully, she is still smiling. She's looking at you, but you suspect that what those hazel eyes are truly seeing is a pin-silent infirmary room with the back of the Captain's head hunched over your wrist. You like to see the good in people, really you do, and perhaps she fears for you, thinks her presence would diffuse whatever tension simmers between you and the Captain. But you've spent the better part of your life enduring the machinations of Mitras' daughters, and you can recognize hidden intentions from kilometers away. *Petra is uncomfortable leaving you alone with him,* the cynic in you whispers.
Dropping the smile, you make no effort to hide your annoyance. Driven from your home by the incessant cattiness, the barbed compliments and gilded smiles, you fled to the Survey Corps hoping for a deeper life, a sense of purpose. You have surrendered enough years suffering that juvenile drama in Mitras, and you really have neither the time nor the patience for any more.

There is no way you're allowing Petra to reclaim your jacket from afar, like a coward, nor are you walking in clinging to her like a lost child. Doubtless the situation would be exploited to her advantage before Levi. (Ah Captain, so sorry! (F/N) left her jacket and was a little nervous about coming here alone!)

"Petra," you say, eyes hard. "Thank you again. But I've weathered 12 weeks of rehab to make up for being stabbed up the arm, only to be told that I will never regain full function. So I'm pretty certain I'll survive picking up my jacket without a chaperone. Unless you want me to feel even more useless than I already do."

At this, she has the graciousness to look abashed, smile dissolving into a blush as her gaze falls to the floor. "Ah, of course. I didn't mean..."

Her words remain suspended in the air as you spin on your heel, delicately twist the handle and tiptoe into the dim lounge. Pausing in the entryway, you allow your eyes to adjust to the muted candlelight as you search for your superior. A dark tuft of hair peeks over the armrest of the couch on the far end of the room, drawing your attention. Levi is sprawled out on the pillows, but even sprawling he manages to do gracefully, a wolf resting after the kill.

Excellent. If memory serves, you abandoned your jacket on a stool by the door. This will be a quick, painless search-and-rescue mission, in and out in a blink, with no need to rouse him.

You squint. From this angle, the stool looks barren. Heart sinking as you approach, you realize it is barren. The jacket is nowhere to be found.

"Looking for something?"

Your intrusion has been caught! The sudden question tears you from your thoughts, and you’re exceptionally proud of yourself for not jumping out of your skin. You’re caught somewhere between incensed and amazed; even as quiet as you were, he deduced your identity without so much as a glance. His meticulous perception could not have kicked in at a worse time.

A pale fist heaves your jacket up to the sky, like a flag marking newly conquered territory. As the dusky candlelight glints off the embroidery, he abandons his glass to better examine his trophy. "Such attention to detail," he mutters in somber admiration, tracing the plump golden stitches. "Must have been a nightmare to make."

Indeed it was. You know because your mother made it especially for you, taking pride in the excruciating labor. The cold winter day you were laughed out of class for your hand-me-downs and dated style, you came home running. You resented your mother for forcing you to go to that wretched, prestigious academy, any eventual career-boost be damned! Among the children of diplomats and magnates, bundled in the finest silks, your frayed shirts and faded skirts blighted you as a pariah. Your family name, modest nobility, bought you no admirers in that ruthless world.

You never said anything, and neither did your mother. Your mother never asked what happened; she didn’t need to. Instead, she burned the midnight oil piecing together a masterpiece, a one-of-kind, hand-crafted, goose-down jacket that promptly silenced your classmates.
Levi cuts this fond reverie short. “You do the 3 cool-down sets?”

Even through the cloud of tipsiness, he is sharp as ever, and somehow has managed to remember what is owed. Who knows, maybe the glass in his hand is just for show.

“No.” The reply is immediate and you kick yourself for being so transparent. You don’t even know what compels you to tell him the truth; if you were to lie and say yes, how would he be the wiser? “I mean, not yet, sir.”

You keep the interaction as short as you can while avoiding outright disrespect. The less time you give him to toy with your head, the better.

He sets down your jacket in favor of his glass, swishing around a dark amber liquid. “What a surprise,” Levi mumbles, eyes following the little whirlpool he has created. “The Mitras runt thinks she can disregard the Honor System.”

There’s some merit to that. By which you mean you felt no reservations against postponing the cool-down sets and hoping he would never find out. Besides, you already completed the more challenging of the two tasks, so clearly you’re not one to shy away from hard work.

“Sir, I had no intention of disregarding it. I completed the mile, as requested, and was just taking a break to grab my jacket. I’ll complete the cool-down sets right after.”

If he approves this official explanation, he gives no indication. Knocking back the glass, Levi closes his eyes. Head lolling against the armrest, he remains motionless, taking a couple of seconds to let the burning whiskey sink into him.

*Good Stones of our Walls*, he must be the most depressing birthday boy in existence.

Eyes still shut, he dangles the precious jacket just in front of you, tantalizingly within reach.

"This jacket?” he asks innocently. "I dunno, I've gotten pretty attached to it. Goes with my fucking complexion, wouldn't you agree?”

Looks like the birthday present he wants from you is to grovel and beg and plead for him to return the beloved jacket. No wonder he and Petra get along; they’re both insufferable.

Your temper bursts open, floodgates crumbling in the wake of the helpless rage that has been festering over the last few weeks.

“It’s from my mother!” you protest.

If you were expecting to cow him into repentance, you are sorely disappointed. Levi quirks an eyebrow at your outburst, silver eyes finally sliding over to you. Edging his head off the armrest, he lifts the jacket up, and for one second you almost believe he will relinquish it back to its rightful owner. Instead, he merely looks at you as he fluffs it up, tucking the jacket under his dark hair.

Silver eyes glint with menace, daring you to question him as he settles into his newfound pillow, rolling his shoulders in exaggerated comfort. The contemptible imp is exploiting your beloved family heirloom for ergonomic neck support.
Wonderful.

“You want it back?” he murmurs in a voice like velvet. “Do double the cool-down sets, and I better not see any sloppy forms. Hop fucking to it.”

And hop you do, launching into jumping jacks, losing yourself in the motions.

Soft as they are, your breaths seem echo in the otherwise silent room. This sudden appreciation of sound snaps you to attention, making you realize that you have no idea where you are supposed to be looking. Typically you would watch your superior officer, ready for their next command. It was hardly out of the ordinary when you were synchronized in motion with a sea of other exercising cadets.

But when the only other person in the room is stretched out on a couch with all the boldness and entitlement of an emperor, scrutinizing your every move for a mistake, you’re no longer sure. Locking gazes while you’re panting and bouncing around, chest heaving, seems far too intimate for your liking.

Weirdly enough, you are fully clothed but you feel just like you imagine the sultry Mitras courtesans must. Exposed. Brazen. Obscene.

With that final thought, your traitorous eyes make the mistake of darting to him. Silver eyes are waiting for you, gleaming like liquid mercury. His gaze is hooded, unblinking, boring into you without mercy.

A private audience with the bane of your existence. An exotic performance for the pleasure of His Majesty.

Cheeks flushing, you keep your mouth into a tight line and settle your gaze on the opposite armrest, where his feet lie. You can’t even tell if he’s watching, because you don’t dare look for his gaze.

Silently, you shift into the second set.

Only when you finally complete the task does Levi bother to right himself, cracking the kinks out of his spine. You watch him expectantly, but he makes no move to return your pilfered jacket. Instead, he drapes his elbows across his knees, leaning forward to study you.

"What's with you?” he demands. “Didn't run your mouth once this whole evening. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. It's just damn abnormal for you.”

No, what’s abnormal is that Levi is apparently half soldier, half human bloodhound that will sniff out your every thought and mood, no matter how deeply buried. Seems all the effort you invested this evening in positioning yourself out of the way, in the shadows, has made little difference.

“Just a bit tired from the rehearsals earlier this week.”

“Cut the crap,” he orders. “If you want to keep it to yourself, that's your business, but don't insult my intelligence.”

Taking your cheek between your molars, you dig your teeth into the flesh, pondering how to possibly package this into words. When you finally speak, you can’t bear to look at him, knowing that he was right all along. "I had my final session of rehab this week," you inform your shoes. "...and it looks like I've made the most progress I ever will..."
To your horror, your eyes are starting to water. "Not even on my first expedition and already my dominant arm is fucking shot." Only belatedly do you notice the expletive. Mercifully, he doesn't comment, and so you continue. "Call me crazy, or naïve, but that was my dream. Slaying Titans. Being useful to humanity. H-how.. how on earth am I supposed to do that now?"

He doesn’t miss a beat. "You kick the Titans in the fucking nads."

Head darting up, you find him watching you intently.

“Um….w-what?”

“You still have legs, don't you? So kick ‘em in the nads,” Levi elaborates.

His gaze is still tracking you closely, but somehow, the cold, calculating edge from when you were executing the cool-down sets has vanished. While you always thought Levi’s expressions came in exclusively two flavors- contempt and smugness- he seems to be sporting a new look, one you’re having trouble defining.

"S-sir, the Titans don't have any, er, nads."

"Because you kicked them all off," he finishes matter-of-factly. To demonstrate, he jerks his knee up into a sleek kick, hissing out a little *pew!*, which is the sound kicking Titan nads makes, apparently.

Unbidden, the image of a grimacing titan jumping foot to foot and grasping at their crotch plagues you. It’s crude and absurd and you can’t help but burst into laughter even while tears spill down your cheeks. After imparting this precious wisdom, Levi finally relaxes back into the sofa, heaving a sigh. “I knew all about your condition. I read the full report.”

Laughter dying in your throat, you shoot him an accusing glare.

"Tch, simmer down, Bleeding-Heart,” he scoffs, waving you off. "Before you leap onto a soapbox and screech at me about privacy, we do this for all you brats, just like Eyebrows does it for us Squad Leaders. It's a necessity. We can't very well ship you out there ignorant of your medical status, thereby risking the mission, your lives and those of your comrades in the process."

Fair enough. You nod in acceptance.

“Can I see it?” he asks, gazing at you pointedly until you realize he is referring to the scar.

The polite request is a thoughtful touch, giving you some semblance of choice when lately you have been feeling like you have absolutely no control over your life. Obliging, you roll up your right sleeve as high as it will go, where it cinches around your elbow in tight, white ringlets. Hidden beneath that cloth, the scar continues a good ways up, extending nearly to your shoulder.

A twitch of his fingers beckons you forward and you comply, presenting your arm for his examination. Holding you by the wrist, Levi lets out a low whistle as he twists your forearm. “That’s deep.”

You don’t cry easy- hell you didn’t cry when you actually got stabbed—but your eyes start flooding again before you can stop them. The Captain clicks his tongue at you, trying to staunch the deluge before it unleashes.

"Oi, don’t you turn into fucking Jaeger on me, flipping your shit every few seconds. You think you're the only injured person in the Corps?"
Okay. Okay, you won’t cry, your superior has ordered you to collect yourself, you will get a grip. A couple tears slipped past, but it’s fine, you can control it, you can. You jut your chin out, head held high, all the symbols of confidence, but it’s not fooling anyone. Lips trembling, you are siphoning every ounce of will power to crush those tears back into your ducts, struggling not to disappoint the Captain, but it’s so hard when you’re already so disappointed in yourself.

His shoulders tense in recognition of your impending collapse, but it’s too late, big, fat droplets come thundering down again. To your credit, there are no ugly gulping sobs or wails, just tears silently streaming down your cheeks. He lets you cry in peace while he distracts himself with your scar, a small but appreciated leniency. Levi’s fingers slowly descend your forearm. From your elbow down to your wrist, they trace every divot of the puckered, uneven flesh.

When Levi finally decides to speak, it’s a hushed murmur. If you don’t focus on his voice, you’ll miss the words. “(F/N), the most impressive thing you have done since enlisting is earn this damn scar.”

Mouth gaping, you stare at him in horror. Have all his encounters with the Titans left him so bereft of mercy? Is his heart this shriveled?

He continues, nonplussed. “It is physical proof that you have let nothing get in the way of your goals. Neither a raging mob of your peers, nor the walking fucking belltower that is Hoover was enough to stop you. Let me say that again: you took on Bertolt Hoover and won, you unquenchable little hellion. Tch, after all that, are you really going to bow down so easily just because Dr. Dipshit says so? Lose your damn mind? Just when things were getting interesting?”

Swiping at your tears with your fingertips, you finally meet his piercing gaze. Cold fingers circle around your scarred forearm, giving a painful squeeze as he tugs you forward.

You lurch into the line of fire, furious granite eyes pinning you on the spot.

“Besides,” he hisses, lip curling up in a dangerous smirk. “You know damn well that if anyone is going to break that resolve of yours, it’ll be me.”

It has all the usual bite, but you know exactly what he is doing. Fueling you to leap up and charge forward. Challenge accepted.

“Good for you, dreaming big.” you retort. Suddenly, your voice softens. “But really… thank you, Captain. Your words they… they mean a to me.”

He still hasn’t relinquished either his hold on your injured forearm, or your jacket. It’s getting late. What should happen if someone were to walk in? If you were to encounter someone in the corridor? This would look inappropriate, there are implications, and you’re not risking your reputation. As you move to extract yourself from his grip, pain shoots down your shoulder and you can’t hide a wince.

Levi clicks his tongue in displeasure. "See? Skimping on cool-downs is exactly how you get a sprain, stubborn runt. Turn around and sit."

He gestures to the floor at his feet and you balk at being commanded like a dog. However it's nearly 2 AM, and after pouring out the thoughts that have been plaguing you for weeks, you have no energy left to dispute. Whirling on your heel, you drop stiffly to the ground before him and cross your legs.

"Lean back, ungrateful brat. I'm not dislocating my shoulder just to fucking reach you."
You edge back, but apparently it's still not enough. Huffing, Levi drags you back by the shoulders, setting you against the cool wooden paneling of the couch.

Calloused hands set to work, kneading your shoulders with brutal force. When you sharply hiss in pain, he only chastises you. "Wouldn't need this much pressure had you done the stretches as told. You're stiff as hell."

Perhaps he doesn’t recognize you have gone rigid from the gob-smacking insight that your superior officer, Humanity’s Strongest, the fearsome Captain Levi, is for all intents and purposes, massaging your shoulders.

In a heart-stopping moment, his icy touch darts just beneath the edges of your shirt. Rough hands mold the rims your shoulders, those far reaches of flesh that are normally hidden under a shirt.

He’s notorious for being able to stomach alcohol well; you’ve heard the many bets his challengers have lost. While you don’t doubt the tales, and he seemed sober enough, how lucid is he, exactly?

You nearly choke when cold fingers trek deeper still, twining around the straps of your bra. Fingertips just barely sneak under the uppermost edge of the fabric cups, tickling soft, intimate flesh, before moving along. An unconventional cool-down to be sure, but never invading explicitly forbidden territory.

Just *dancing* on the border.

All the while, Levi is rattling off facts about the risks of sprains, reprimanding you for lacking the discipline to properly condition and maintain your physique. Detailed and clinical, the conversation tells you that he can’t possibly be thinking about *anything* else.

You are nestled between his knees while he hovers over you, his breath searing the back of your neck, and yet, touching you is pure science to him, a calculated necessity for his inept subordinate. He’s only stepping in because *clearly* you can’t take care of yourself. Nothing more.

It's not like you were *Petra*, after all. Pretty and talented and ever so at his disposal. At his every beck and call. No, you were just Cadet (L/N). Her track record is worthy of respect, and you wholly give it. But you can't possibly understand why Levi is so kind to her, and for that matter why he seems more merciful with everyone, than with *you*. Petra throws herself at his feet willingly, enslave herself and calls it love; Oluo imitates his every gesture, sculpting his entire life out of Levi’s essence. The cadets vie for his affections, fighting for the chance to impress him. Is that what it is? Because you don't drool over his biceps or worship his kill count, he has to crush you? Or does he simply find you unworthy of his regard?

The thoughts bother you for reasons you refuse to let yourself to look into. At some point, you can’t recall exactly when, a part of you began to crave his respect. Not his attention, not his love, just a recognition that you mattered, that this entire journey to the outermost reaches of the country in order to sign up for certain death wasn't in vain. That your *dedication* and *hard work* and *sacrifice* actually mean *something*.

Gasp, you are jolted out of your thoughts by a cold finger pressing into the hollow at the base of your neck. It creeps up the column of your throat. Tracing exactly the ridges of your windpipe, one by one. Digs into the bottom of your chin, forcing your head back, back, back as far as it will go. Silver eyes are glaring at you, upside-down. Despite the ferocity, you find yourself marveling at how the candlelight dances in his eyes. Such an unusual color.

Lucky, *lucky* Petra. Too bad, you never had it in you to be as… *accommodating*, as she is.
"Did you hear a fucking thing I just said?" He demands.

"W-what?" You stammer.

Well, that’s one question solved..

His eyes are possessed by a sudden wickedness. *Here it comes*, you mentally groan.

"Oh am I boring you, princess?" Levi whispers as he grips your chin. A sweetness lingers on his breath, like burnt caramel, a parting gift from the whiskey. "Let's give you something to remember, then."

It happens quickly.

Far too quickly for you to process it.

All you know is that there is suddenly something soft and warm sealing your lips and *Holy Walls he's kissing you*, teeth gnashing against yours. Frozen, you keep your eyes peeled wide open, but you can’t catch his expression because he dove down from a completely different direction. Firm hands drag you even further back, his shins digging against your shoulder blades, as he twists for a better angle. One hand forces your chin still for him, while the other submerges under your shirt to trace lazy circles on your back. Moist lips grapple together in a bold, loud *squelch*, igniting your cheeks as a fog settles over your mind.

He exploits your confusion to deepen the kiss, slipping his tongue inside. His tongue shamelessly wanders around the cavern, taking time to explore every crevice, before returning to the center to conquer your own, pinning your tongue down to the floor of your mouth. With his tongue writhing against yours, the taste of blazing oak and caramel tears down your throat, rocketing into the very tips of your curled toes, smearing all your senses together, as you drown in him.

Before you can think, you are wrapping an arm up around the nape of his neck, drawing him even closer, letting your tongue dance with his—

Shoulders tensing, he jolts backwards like he was electrified, leaving a fine strand of saliva connecting you. By the time you blink, he has severed it with a ruthless swipe of his hand.

“*Fuck,*” Levi mutters.

In one fluid motion, he has risen to his feet.

Stepped over you.

Only seconds and he’s at the door.

With his back facing you, he issues his final order for the night. “Cadet (L/N), you will collect your personal belongings, snuff out the candles and return to the female barracks *immediately.*”

Mind swimming, you try to formulate proper words.

All that comes out is a garbled sound of indignation.

“*Dismissed.*”

The lounge door slams shut. At long last, you clutch your jacket, but despite its thick goose-down, somehow you are left feeling so very cold.
Title inspired by the sexeh, sexeh song *Firebreather* by Laurel.

First kiss is always a doozy, eh?

I headcannon Levi as being very somber on his birthday. It's a holiday you celebrate with family, and so the memories of his loved ones will inevitably weigh on him heavily.

...Of course, your little smooch certainly helps heal the ache...
Sup y'all. It's been a while :]

Firstly, this chapter is dedicated to mauhve, whose birthday is today! Happy Birthday!

A sincere thank you to everyone who has been kudo-ing, commenting and bookmark-ing! You guys are making me blush ;) I've said this before, but I really can be self-conscious about my writing, so I appreciate it!

Had to take a pause to figure out the direction of the plot in greater detail. Henceforth, this story will be rejoining AoT's plot as of the Female Titan arc. That being said, there will be some key different twists, because I don't want to just rehash the manga/anime. So without giving too much away, here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Etched into every contour, fused into even the smallest flake of skin, you can feel it. It continues to be *palpable, tangible,* almost pulsing with a life of its own, even during the 84th time you run your fingers over your bottom lip. There’s no way it could have happened, and yet it’s so bizarre it must be true. That night’s candlelit memory plasters a dizzy smile onto your face, seriously disturbing Sasha.

“Are you hungry? Because you keep touching your mouth and smiling like a creep,” she informs you.

Color rising to your cheeks, you duck your head into a quick shake ‘no’ and continue hauling out chairs to the central courtyard. In the days since, Captain Levi has been scarce, but you know you will see him tonight, the culmination of the 104th Training Corps’ bone-breaking preparation.

The fact that has your toes curling in your boots.

How will he react, when Commander Erwin calls your name at the Night of the Disbanding Ceremony? Will your eyes meet across the crowd, as you march to the front to claim your certificate? What if Petra catches the *look*? Will he ask you to dance at the Graduation Gala tonight? Exchange a few parting words? It will be the last time you’ll see any of the veterans for a while; the 56th Expedition Outside The Walls commences at dawn tomorrow, while you and the rest of the newly-minted graduates will be carted off to practice with the Garrison.

Your right knee smacks into someone’s newly placed chair; you very nearly go flying, but Jean seizes you by the arm last second, snapping at you for ruining the impeccable alignment of the row he was working on.

You smack the chair over with your other arm for good measure.

Jean’s eye twitches. You bask in the ensuing chaos as he reads you the riot act, Connie urging him to *lower his voice* before—

“While I understand chairs are a foreign concept to horses, *Kirschtein,* the legs are supposed to be on the *ground,* Not facing the sky.”

By instinct, the lot of you click your heels together and snap your spines straight, saluting The Captain. Jean has also obliged, but makes sure to direct his furious glare at you, potent enough to melt iron. Just as guilt begins chipping away at you, a hand clamps down on Jean’s shoulder as your once tormentor steps out from behind him.

“Or has your brain just combusted from holding onto a *pretty girl*?”

You've taken pains to doll yourself up today, and you're elated it shows. It's Jean's turn to blush. Hissing, he immediately releases your wrist, much to the hidden delight of your comrades in the courtyard. The celebration is short-lived, however, as ice-tone eyes turn on you.

“Cadet (L/N), a word.”
Slipping back into the throng of cadets, Jean only looks too thrilled at the Captain setting his sights on a new victim. Low mutters break out and you almost smirk in glee. Poor little lambs think you’re in trouble! It’s so cute; they have no idea. Levi leads you out of the courtyard, threading his way up staircases. Dark tufts of his undercut flutter behind him as he cuts through the castle; you can almost imagine how soft they would feel against your fingertips. So lost are you in your reverie that there is barely enough time to dart through the crevice of the door before it closes.

You find yourself in a room so bereft of furniture that you almost wonder if it’s meant for storage. A handsome oak desk stands at the far end, bare of anything except a bronze plaque bearing Levi’s name and title. Ruthlessly polished, the desk gleams in the afternoon light filtering through the window. Two nearly empty bookcases line the walls on either side. Two chairs on either side of the desk. Not a single object more. No photos. No mementos. No trinkets. Nothing to denote this room’s occupant, besides the plaque, and you have a feeling it’s only on display because it needs to be.

Levi settles on the chair across from you, drawing himself to his full height. Palms clasping either armrest, he takes full possession of the seat, owning it, a sovereign ruling over his kingdom. As short as he may be, Levi’s presence seems to smother the entire room. You glance at the other seat, but he says nothing. When it becomes apparent the invitation to sit is not forthcoming, your smile begins to falter.

“Cadet, I assume you know why I have asked you here?” he drawls, slipping one leather boot over the other.

Hands clasped behind your back, you answer in the negative. Did you mistake what this meeting must be about? Because you can’t quite fathom the venom in his tone.

“The events that transpired the evening of the celebration,” he grinds out, plowing through your confusion like a steam train thundering down its route. Much like the room surrounding you, Levi’s introduction is painfully bland and squeaky clean, expunged of any identifying details whatsoever. “An oversight on my part,” he concedes, looking you dead in the eye. “One that will not happen again. Understood?”

Humiliation washes over you before morphing into fury. In the distant corners of your mind, you recognize that a superior-subordinate liaison is strictly prohibited. You appreciate the fact that, at any given moment, anyone could die, and to form attachments would be to willingly excoriate yourself.

He is only being rational, your mind pleads with you. Let it go!

If he’s so rational, he shouldn’t have pulled this stunt to begin with, your heart hisses back, vindictive. You will be damned if this is started and ended purely on his own terms. The giddy high that colored your anticipation of the Disbanding Ceremony whooshes out of you. You deflate like a soap bubble, vanishing without anyone to notice.

Common.

Cheap.

Somehow, a smile carves itself back onto your face, but it’s the furthest thing from pleasant. “Of
course, Captain,” you reply, smiling sweetly. The words tumble out of your mouth before you can stop them. “After all, it wouldn’t be the first time you crossed a line with me.”

You might as well have cracked a ceramic plate over his skull. Silver eyes shrink into pinpoints.

“Cadet,” Levi insists with a hiss. “This was one of the few times no disrespect was intended, I assure you.”

“Sir, if this is all, then permission to seek my leave,” you say. “We have a lot to set up for tonight.”

His jaw works furiously as he assesses you, digging his nails into the armrests. Moments slip by, as this silence grows and grows till it's threatening to swallow the both of you. He's waiting for something from you, that much is obvious, but you refuse to surrender any energy into figuring out what it is. This may have started on his terms but it will most certainly not end on them.

"...Granted."

You offer him a quick nod, only the most fundamental pretense of procedure, before spinning on your heel and exiting The Captain's office.

Under the infinite starlight, Commander's Erwin's impassioned speech echoes in the courtyard, shaking even the stones of the castle to their very core. He really does have an incredible presence, you muse, radiating with all the grace and power of thunder. You're certain that charisma alone will be enough to sway some of the top graduates into abandoning the luxuries of the Military Police for the wilderness beyond the Walls.

Ultimately, the fight you put up during the Third Advanced Exercise manages to nab you 7th Rank, meaning you are one of the lucky few who has the following week to request your placement among the three branches of the military. You and your fellow Top Tens are called to the stage for a special commemoration, before certificates are distributed to the remaining graduates. No one mentioning that the document is only a few degrees off from a death warrant for these particular trainees. After a few final congratulatory remarks, chairs are swept aside to make room for the Graduation Gala. Torches blaze in accompaniment to soft, airy music from the musical ensemble situated in the corner of the room. Memories of strolling down Mitras' cafe-lined streets at night come flooding back, and you wonder if you'll ever see them again.

Heaving a sigh, you shuffle yourself out of the way and into the line for refreshments. You would have liked to remember it, this night you worked so hard for, but you've been teetering in and out of attention because you're trying too hard to appear cool and calm and collected before the capricious, ice-hearted shrimp standing next to Hange.

"Hey. You do realize 7th is in the Top 10?" Jean says, ribbing you. "Why the long face?"

The remark stings, especially; not only are you wasting your time moping after the whims of some temperamental imp, but you're also being ungrateful. Your gaze falls on Sasha, trailing after Jean. She wouldn't have to deliberate over what placement to request. It had already been decided for her.

"Just trying to imitate yours, my dear Horsey," you reply with a wink. This earns the first genuine laugh you've heard from Sasha in a while, but Jean looks unperturbed.

"You talk a big game, Number 7," he purrs, patting your head. "But I can't hear you too well from all the way up here at Number Four."
"Then you should probably see a veterinarian."

He terminates this banter by forcibly standing between you and the food. You struggle to reach around him, but Jean matches your every move, keeping you at bay with a smirk. Slip to the right and he'll bump his shoulder into you. Weave to the left and he'll smush you into his side to prevent you from bypassing him. Being the incredible leader Jean is, he even manages to indoctrinate Marco and Sasha into this righteous cause of keeping you away from the food! It's a particularly petulant bit of revenge, but the demon-Horse keeps it up until you're wailing for forgiveness.

"C'mon Jean, she's getting so gaunt! Can't we let her have a little?" Marco pleads.

"Ugh, you always were the bleeding heart type," Jean drawls. Just as you rush to the table, he catches you by the arm. "Tell you what. We'll stop this siege on the singular condition that I feed you. Can't have these lowly Ranks getting too uppity, y'know?"

You're about to respond, but that's when you feel it. It's really not something you should be able to feel, but heeding your intuition, you turn to find his eyes on you. Across the courtyard, he's lounging in a dark corner with one arm draped over Petra's shoulders.

But that's not what bothers you.

No one has ever looked at you with such pure, unadulterated venom. If a gaze could vaporize you on the spot, this would be it.

Now that you're watching, he's happy to give you a show. Reeling her closer into his side, he ducks his head into Petra's ear, whispering secrets that have her blushing hard enough to outmatch her ginger hair.

The tips of their fingers are touching.

*Intertwined.*

Perched atop their knees.

Fury ignites your veins, coursing through you in place of blood. You don't think you've ever known such rage.

"Check out the Captain," Jean murmurs appreciatively. You struggle to mask the tempest of emotions thundering through you.

"Public displays of affection are so pre-teen," you inform Jean, in case he is wondering. Your helpful observation doesn't seem to do a thing to dampen Jean's awe. Connie runs up to your group
to ask if you're seeing what he's seeing, aren't Captain Levi and Petra adorable!

Tears are pricking at your eyes and there's no one here to help you, no one who could possibly understand your secret history, because the one person who knows the situation best is sitting across the room getting cozy with a different girl. Hands balled into trembling fists, you realize that your sentiments the first day were right. You despise Captain Levi, a self-absorbed, cruel brute unworthy of his heroic reputation. Once a classless thug, always a classless thug.

No.

You won't allow him to reduce you to this, won't allow him to jerk you by a string whenever he pleases. You need to regain some semblance of control and you need to do it fast.

Dabbing at your eyes, you turn to Jean, smiling sickly sweet. "We should go congratulate them!"

"What the fuck?" Jean cries out, but it's too late. You've linked arms with him and are dragging him across the floor strolling towards the new lovebirds. You arrive to pay your respects, but they don't disengage. With his talents, you know full well that he's aware of your presence. You clear your throat. Nothing Jean tugs on your sleeve desperately, but you only clear it again, holding his arm tighter.

Rolling his eyes, Levi extracts himself from Petra. She's absolutely starry-eyed, much like you had been these past few days. A titan could probably pirouette into the hall and she wouldn't notice. Leaning his head back against the wall, Levi drags his tongue against his teeth.

"Kirschtein, this better be good."

He doesn't even acknowledge you.

You're smiling so hard that you're pretty sure you're face is going to crack down the middle any second. Sneaking a furtive glance at Jean, you purr, "We just wanted to congratulate you, didn't we Jean? You guys look so cute together!" To his credit, Jean plays his part smoothly, probably figuring that you're trying to suck up for brownie-points.

Petra blushes and chirps her delight, but you hear nothing. All you can focus on is how Levi stares at you, silent and impassive. Suddenly, you're unsure if you made a mistake coming up here. Bidding them farewell, you kidnap Jean with you as you flee.

The remainder of the night is a blur of accepting congratulations on making 7th Rank and well-wishes to those who did not. You excuse yourself from the Gala as soon as socially acceptable, making a beeline for the female barracks. Busying yourself about the room, you labor to find tasks to occupy yourself. Tidying your side of the room. Slowly shedding your clothes and folding them. Scrubbing every inch of yourself twice over in a shower. Brushing your teeth with far more diligence than you normally spare. These tasks are your only company away from morbid thoughts. Burrowing under your covers, you're able to convince Sasha you are peacefully slumbering when she finally joins you.

When at last 4 AM rolls around, you are forced to confront the fact that you will not be sleeping
tonight.

Throwing a cardigan over your sleepwear, you tiptoe past Sasha and make your way down to the Mess Hall kitchen. Ordinarily, it would be locked promptly after curfew, but you're hoping you can manage to pry it open. If you're lucky, the cleaning crew will have forgotten to bolt it shut in the tumult ensuing after the Gala. The cool ground kisses the soles of your socks, seeping into your skin, as you pad through the abandoned corridors. Sneaking out after curfew is strangely therapeutic, allowing you time to for scrutiny that's impossible when your barreling towards a deadline. Lends a sort of perspective. Only a year previously, you would get lost if left to your own devices. Dangle helplessly from 3DMG equipment. Arrive late to practice. Now, you graduate among the top of your class.

Jean was right; you have much to be proud of. Technically, even a broken clock is right twice a day, but you're feeling generous enough to grant your dashing Horse some credit here. You don't know how you became entangled in thorns of The Captain's ruthless moods, but you had lost more than enough time moping about it. At the risk of sounding a little vicious, you were happy the vets were embarking on the 56th Expedition today. Of course, you wished them all a safe and swift return, but the distance would do you good.

Weaving through the wooden benches of the Mess Hall, you give the double doors an experimental push. Groaning in protest, the wooden slabs inch forward.

Success!

Your fate was looking up already. You're salivating over the thought of a nice warm cup of milk with a dash of cinnamon-the way your mother used to make it. The perfect antidote to the emotional incineration you had endured.

Gone when sought and present when unwanted.

Hunched on a stool is the person you least want to see. Silver eyes slide over to you, unreadable as ever.

Tucking your chin down, you grudgingly offer a greeting. Although this encounter feels like being grated, you're not about to risk your newfound status as 7th Rank, or arm him with fodder for more insubordination demerits in your record. You can't imagine Erwin would look kindly on a trainee violating curfew, no matter the excuse.

Figuring he'll ignore you, or perhaps snarl a warning, you dart to the pantry. Hopefully, his focus on the upcoming expedition will slow his reactions down; with any luck, you can stock up before that point. Maybe pilfer a biscuit or two on your way out.

Sasha really is rubbing off on you.
As you work, a warm, spicy scent wafts in after you, teasing. Whatever it is that the bane of your existence is indulging in, it smells heavenly.

"Hi."

It's murmured so softly that you're pondering whether you're still half-asleep and wishfully dreamed it up. No matter, it doesn't merit a response; you already saluted him as necessary and so owe him nothing more.

"Seems Kirschtein is seriously interested in you."

Provocation. He really does have excellent aim, shooting straight through your ribs and right into your pumping heart. You school your features into an inscrutable mask, his favorite expression. Busying yourself with rinsing a mug, you ignore him. You're in no mood for Levi's heckling.

"The brat has taste," he mumbles under his breath.

The mug slips free of your grasp, careening down to the sink. By some miracle, your fingers cinch around it at the last second, seizing it in mid-flight. Small rivulets course towards the drain below, all starting from different points but all coming to the same end. Little glass snakes weaving around the sink, losing a droplet or two but never changing course. Just like the man behind you, slithering in and out of moods like a snake shedding skin and charging ever onwards.

You're uncertain if you were actually supposed to hear this last admission. Whirling around to face him, you find that a cup of tea has been fixed for you. He slides it across the kitchen island toward you. With the enticing steam heading your way, you finally place the scent.

Turmeric.

"I wish you all the best with him."

The cloying, greeting card-degree of faux compassion sets you off. Lightning striking a gnarled tree would have been a calmer reaction by comparison. Captain Levi doesn't get to whisper dirty nothings and pet his second-in-command, then act like a generous saint giving you his blessing.

"Oh, so suddenly you care?" You demand. "How generous. But truth be told, I am sick and tired of your passive-aggressive bullshit, Captain Levi sir. Please send my regards to Petra."
Surprise bolts across his features but he recovers quickly. Clicking his tongue in displeasure, Levi slips off the stool, stalking towards you. He may have been physically taller on the stool, but now is somehow far more intimidating. Hairs on the back of your neck bristling, you draw yourself as tall as you possibly can be, hoping the color hasn't drained from your face.

Levi's hands slam down on either side of the counter behind you, boxing you in.

"Why do you insist on being so damn difficult?" he hisses. "He could give you a relationship, a family should you want one. I'm doing you a fucking favor, you unruly runt. Can't you see that?"

"I don't want any favors from you!" you snap back.

His eyes are the color of a pale winter morning and just as icy when they settle on you, slipping down to your toes, before meandering back up. It's then that you feel the gooseflesh rippling on your legs, realizing you have waltzed down here in skimpy shorts and a tank top. You try to shrug into your cardigan as subtly as possible.

He lets out a dark, mirthless chuckle, tilting his head. "So what do you want, then?"

The answer is staring you in the face, but you don't have the gall, can't bring yourself to admit the truth. Pride prevents you, wraps around your throat and chokes down the words. You know the second he catches a whiff of weakness he will pounce. Mocking you for your muddled emotions, chiding you for being weak, repeating his favorite motto: you're not cut out for this, idiot. You'll never make it.

You can't, you can't tell him, can't possibly put it into words.

So you decide to show him instead. Turning your head, you catch his lips, pressing lightly before retreating.

Fog descends on those haunting silver eyes. You've never seen anyone look more miserable.

Fingers dig into your shoulders as he drills his weight into you. Cool metal bites into you, eating away through the thin fabric of your nightwear as he presses you further against the sink. "Look, if you're half as clever as you like to think you are, you'd go back to Mitras. Back to your family. You've already proven you're Top Ten material, so go make the Military Police halfway decent. There's no further reason to stay here."

"So why are you here, Humanity's Strongest?" you whisper.

Narrowing his eyes, he releases you, stepping back to give himself room. "Get some sleep, (L/N). You're not thinking clearly." Snatching his tea off of the counter, he leaves you to join the growing din in the Mess Hall.
You wonder how many of them you'll see when they come back.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Captain my Captain. Feels aren't your forte, are they?

Any guesses as to why I chose turmeric?

Hold onto your gear, ladies and gents. This is about to get turbulent.
Well, here we are. After a year of brutal Survey Corps training, time to see what you're made of.

Wanna up the ante as you read? Highly recommend listening to this: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtqQ7xpQeZc

Best of luck, recruit!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Dark flecks surge across the horizon, charting the Survey Corps' progress as they burrow deep into the lands lost to the Titans, a wasteland no human has dared to live in over the last half a decade. Wind sweeps your hair left and right, threatening to dislodge you any second from your vantage point atop Wall Rose.

"Can't wait till it's my turn," Eren murmurs, jade eyes drinking up the scene as he moves to stand next to you. "We'll finally reclaim our birthright."

Twining excitement and dread fill you, but you hum in agreement. What courage it must take, venturing into lands where anything could happen. There would be no safety net to rely on, no guidebook to refer to.

"Hey! Did the Survey Corps dump its leftovers onto us? Get to work, you two, we're low on hands today!" Sergeant Bahar barks at you. The Garrison vet's glare follows in your wake as you and Eren hustle back to your spots, sponging the cannons and scrubbing at the tracks.

Given that your class had only recently graduated, you were considered ill-fit to join the expedition
this time around; in the Survey Corps' absence, your lot was training with the Garrison, the closest branch of the military that you would work with as Survey Corps soldiers. The Garrison, in turn, was split today between mentoring your group, manning Headquarters and reinforcing security at the inner Wall guarding Mitras, Wall Sina. Ears pricking in shame, you avoided everyone's gazes when this last fact had been announced; with the Survey Corps leaving Wall Rose unguarded, it boggled your mind that such a massive part of the Garrison forces had been diverted to support the Military Police in protecting Wall Sina, as if the lives of the people in Mitras mattered more than those of the people living closest to the Titans. You suppose Mitras had bought the Garrison elites' added support, while the citizens of Wall Rose, too poor to do the same, could only hope the remaining veterans stationed around were enough.

Getting to experience the inner workings of the Garrison has proven surprisingly interesting. You'd never ridden one of the elevator platforms to the top of the Wall before, much less gotten to glimpse the lands beyond. Humans once inhabited these lands, Sergeant Bahar had informed you with a grimace, once when Wall Maria was still intact. You find it hard to believe only five years had passed, when all you can see for kilometers is ash and crumbling buildings.

Your vigorous cannon-cleaning is rewarded with a cloud of sparks and filth, exploding from the snout and smothering you. Hacking a cough, you throw away the rags you had been using, now useless, and head to the inner edge of the Wall to restock.

"Hey Connie, mind handing me-"

You're screaming.

At least, you think you're screaming, because the sharp ringing filling your ears is drowning just about everything as you go hurtling over the inner edge of the Wall face-first. Air whips past you as you plunge down.

With a crack, your descent halts, pain spasming down your spine. Trost swims to and fro, your vision swaying as people dart around below like frenzied ants. Tucking your chin over your shoulder, you glance up to discover your savior. Holding onto the elevator cables, Connie has launched himself towards you, seizing your ankle at the last possible second.

But it's what lies beyond that bald head of his that has you shaking.

You can't decide whether you're truly alive or whether that fall must have killed you, because what you're looking at can't possibly be real. Months of scrutinizing page after page of detailed Survey Corps records have given you a name for it. Hange has supplemented that knowledge with many a crude chalkboard drawing. None of that prepares you for what you see.

Blotting out the sun, a massive red skull is peeking over Wall Rose. Unblinking eyes stare ahead, enormous enough for you to swim in. Juicy pink sinews glisten, thick as tree trunks. Suddenly, the cool air atop the wall is thick with humidity, sweat beading down your back. This
looks nothing like the wooden practice Titans you were trained to slice. Muscles freezing into stone, you realize you have never before felt true fear; Connie is urging you to right yourself using your gear, but for some reason your body refutes to respond. Terror settles into you like a poison, paralyzing you into numb prey at the mercy of this unthinkable monster. Snarling, Connie swings you up onto the elevator before leaping back onto the Wall, leaving you to gather your bearings on the swaying platform.

Eren is only one of you prepared, launching screaming into an attack. Pitching himself over the Wall without a second thought, he fires a hook into its elbow and charges forward. Standing dumb, your fellow trainees and the Garrison vets can only watch as the green-eyed spitfire races across one massive bicep. His passion whips them back into shape. Sergeant Bahar rallies the veterans to support.

"Recruits, brace yourselves!" she hollers. "It'll kick the Wall any second!"

You've only just enough time to fist the elevator cables before a violent shudder rips up Wall Rose. shrieking, you hold on for dear life as the platform swings wildly with the spasm. Supplies teeter off the edge, plummeting to the ground as you struggle not to think about how those cannonballs could have been you.

"Come on, Eren!" roars Connie. "End this fucker!"

Pinching your arm, you let the sharp pain snap you out of your stupor as you zoom back into the fray. Eren has disappeared behind the Colossal Titan's shoulder; in mere moments he will be at the nape. Garrison vets are clambering up either arm after him.

"DIE!!" comes Eren's bloodcurdling howl from beyond the skull.

Eagerly you await for the Colossal Titan to collapse against Wall Rose, for the life- if it can be called that- to drain from its hideous eyes.

One second, you're staring at a massive jaw; the next, you're covering your eyes and choking as blinding blast of steam mushrooms up where the Colossal Titan once stood. Eren and the small squad of vets scramble to adjust in mid air, plunging hooks and alighting onto the outer side of the Wall. Before you can wonder just how on earth this behemoth vanished into thin air, Armin breaks the silence.

"Sergeant!" he shrieks. "Where the Colossal goes, the Armored Titan is sure to follow!"

The grim realization descends on all of you, sending your hearts pounding. There can only be one target. The only possible Wall humanity has left: Wall Sina. To make matters worse, in the chaos of this crucial attack on humanity, the only soldiers seasoned enough to possibly stand a chance are kilometers away, disappearing in the hills beyond the Wall.

In seconds, Sergeant Bahar has rounded up her elites. "VETERANS! ARM YOURSELVES AND GET TO THE ELEVATORS IMMEDIATELY! THIS ISN'T OVER!"

Hauling himself over the Wall, Eren rushes to side with the vets, before Bahar wrenches him away by the collar.
"Where the hell do you think you're going?" she hisses.

"I can help!" Eren pleads.

Shoving him by the neck over the Wall, Bahar points down. "See that hole? Titans will come pouring in any second. Unless you want every last citizen of Trost dead, you'll help by alerting HQ! All of you! NOW!"

The imminent threat to Trost's civilians seems enough to convince Eren, who nods his agreement. Garrison vets flood the elevator in an instant. Space is left for a handful of recruits to join and you're one of the ones quick enough to leap on board. The elevator platform begins careening down, wind whistling in your ears. Your remaining comrades have no choice but to wait anxiously atop the Wall until this elevator frees up, or to find another way down.

Halfway through your rapid descent, you suck in a sharp breath as you catch sight of it.

Calloused, tough plates of skin cover its hide, almost gleaming golden in the noon light. If it was standing still, you would have thought it a monument of sorts. Swarmed by Titans of every class, the Armored Titan's stocky body arrives through the cavernous hole of the Wall that once protected you.

Leaping off the platform, Bahar hurtles down, blades singing through the air as her subordinates follow suit. Next to you, Armin is fidgeting, trying to speak but nobody minds him.

"...it won't work!"

You do very much mind this last bit.

"What? What do you mean?" you demand, whirling on him.

With exquisite aim, Bahar lands on the Armored Titan's shoulder. Darting to the nape, she instantly sets to hacking away with both blades, raw thuds breaking out as metal slams repeatedly against the thick slabs of skin. Two more vets join her, sawing their ultrahard steel against its hide.

Nothing.

Terrified blue eyes turn to you. "The b-blades... t-they can't pierce-"

Joints slowing down, the Armored Titan comes to a complete halt, allowing the rest of the veterans to join the effort atop his neck.

"S-see Armin, they managed to stop it," you reassure, voice trembling. "Have some faith in them. With all of them working together they'll definitely break through!"
Two motions is all it takes.

Before you can blink, the Armored Titan leaps backwards, ramming into Wall Rose, which spasms from the impact. A chorus of screams ring out as your comrades struggle to find purchase on the convulsing platform, shoving into each other and grabbing onto anyone lucky enough to hold a rail or cable.

The Armored Titan stalks forward once more, corpses fluttering down from crater in the Wall its neck left behind.

By the time your elevator touches the ground, all members of the 48th Squad within the Trost District Regiment of the Garrison are dead.

Veterans with years of more experience and skill than any of you are horrifically and absolutely gone. The monster that slew them all stands mere meters away from you. Its broad shoulders drown you all in the darkness of a humongous shadow. On instinct, Jean flattens himself into the Wall and snaps his arms up, shoving as many of you on either side of him as he can back into the Wall.

"Everyone shut the fuck up!" he hisses. "Don't draw its attention here!"

Clutching at each other, you and Sasha try to squeeze yourself into the pores of the stone behind you. Mikasa forcibly wrestles Eren still, digging her nails across his mouth. Shaking violently, you bite your lip to keep from screaming yourself. Screwing your eyes shut and snapping them open, again and again, does nothing to change the scene before you.

"J-just like five years ago," Armin stutters, gazing up at the Titan helplessly.

Rolling its neck, the Armored Titan comes back to life, rumbling forward and breaking into an jog. Your blood turns to ice as you remember its target. Straight towards Wall Sina, the Wall behind which your mother is bustling about her sewing workshop, unaware of any danger. Behind which Sina Academy stands, with its teachers and divas and bullies. Almost everyone you have ever known, hated and loved lives behind that Wall. The Wall that is about to be crushed as if it were no more than paper.

"W-we have to go after it!" you whisper, feverish.

"Did you see what happened to the vets? We have to fall back and get to HQ!" Jean retorts.

"If we don't, there will be nothing left to fall back on!" you insist. "Wall Sina is our only hope!"

Jean's hazel eyes widen at this, the conclusion he didn't dare want to come to on his own.
"E-even if we wanted to, even if we could, our blades won't work," Armin points out. "We have no choice but to leave."

"Even that is gonna be something of a challenge," mutters Marco, lifting up the left blade holster of his 3DMG to reveal an ugly dent. "That explosion seriously screwed over my gear. Not to mention, we've got company."

Titans are creeping through hole left in the Colossal' Titans wake. The longer you wait, the more of the beasts will gush in. The more time you waste, the closer the Armored Titan will get to Wall Sina. You remain quiet, scouring your mind for ideas, as the trainees that came down with you begin readying their gear for takeoff.

Panicked whinnying meets your ears. You turn to find a few horses that have survived the invasion, whipping their heads as they try in vain to break free of their tethers.

Mikasa, Armin and Eren have already departed for Garrison Headquarters when you finally speak.

"There's enough of us going to HQ that the message will be delivered; some of us must to take on the Armored Titan. All we need to do is stall it."

"Yeah, that's all," Jean replies, rolling his eyes. "No biggie."

"Well, I agree there's no point to getting the Garrison troops if Wall Sina's already gone by the time they arrive," Connie says. "If you have a plan, (F/N), lay it on us in the next few seconds or I'm out."

Glancing around you, you survey who is left. Jean, Sasha, Connie, Marco and Annie. You had almost missed the blonde, given how quiet she is being. Of all the days to be missing Bertolt and Reiner, two of the best 3DMG talents within the Survey Corps, now is the worst possible time.

They must be coming on the elevator's second trip down. Too bad you have no time to wait.

"We'll need a cart, some spare cable and hell of a lot of luck," you say.

Hooves smash against cobbled streets as you and Connie force your horses to sprint at their limit.

"This is a suicide mission," Jean hisses, tightening his hold around Connie's belly. "I can't believe I got talked into this!"

Each of the Armored Titan's plodding steps split the ground like an earthquake. Thighs large as buildings move up and down, pummeling the earth. Everything convulsing around you makes the horses near impossible to ride, swerving in every direction but forward, and you squeeze your thighs against the mare's girth to remain stable.

Your objective is as simple as it is impossible: stopping the Armored Titan in its tracks. You and Connie will be the jockeys, goading the horses into a gallop to catch up with the Armored Titan as fast as possible. The best 3DMG operators among you- Annie and Jean- will ride behind the jockeys. Once your group is within range, Annie and Jean will leap off of the saddles, shooting forward ensnare the Armored Titan's feet with spare 3DMG cables. By the time the Armored Titan is tangled in the cables, Marco and Sasha will arrive with a cart in tow, loaded with all the artillery they could scavenge at the base of Wall Rose.

Let's see this beast withstand cannon-fire, you think.
What makes the Armored Titan so powerful also brings along a certain weakness. Aside from short bursts of speed, the thing moves incredibly slowly, weighed down by the massive plates of hardened skin coating its body. Something tells you that you haven't seen the last of it's ability to move quickly; it is likely conserving its energy for the sprint into the final Wall.

Driving your heels into the horse's sides, you send it dashing ahead with a frightened cry. You wince, eyes watering as her flurried hooves kick up dust.

Even at its ambling pace, the Armored Titan's enormous stride has enabled it to cover a frightening amount of territory. Even with the Armored Titan in your sights, it takes a solid thirty minutes to finally approach the beast, by which time you are already halfway to Wall Sina.

Ragged breaths pumping in and out of their muzzles, your horses are beginning to tire. You struggle to keep steady as the saddle slides on the sweat built up on the coats of your overworked horses.

None of you will be able to keep this chase up much longer.

"If this is going to work, we need to do it soon," Annie mumbles in your ear.

"But we're not close enough!" you protest.

"There's a large town square beyond this. Not enough targets too hook onto," Annie points out, tapping her holsters.

Either now, with a compromised chance, or no chance at all. Exchanging grim looks with Connie and Jean, you all finally set the plan into motion.

Cables whir past your ear as Annie and Jean rocket forward on either side of you. The burst of speed from the running horses has bought them some time, allowing them to land on rooftops a few meters ahead of the oncoming Armored Titan. With only seconds to spare, they fire off hooks into buildings opposite each other. Unspooling the extra cables, they dart back and forth, back and forth, weaving a sloppy web of metal across the street as fast as they possibly can. Stones, balconies, anything and everything is converted into a hook for tying the cables.

By the time the Armored Titan notices the metal cables glinting in the sun, it's too late. Burdened by the plates, the Titan's reflexes are too slow to kick in, and its massive body smashes into the web. Creaking, the cables are straining to contain the Armored Titan's inertia, with a few bursting outright. With an awful grumbling, the buildings that the cables are fixed on start leaning forward and your heart leaps into your throat.

Jerking your reins forward, you spin your steed around and holler at Marco to hurry up. He and Sasha are only at the mouth of this street, meters away, as the loaded cart weighs them down.

Warmth and weight crush your leg as Connie's horse rams into you and you hiss in pain; snatching your reins, Connie drags you to the side.

Slamming into the cobblestones where you once stood, a gigantic heel drops down. The Armored Titan is backing up.

Like a wrestler, the beast begins to hunker down, one brawny shoulder poised forward. Your eyes
widen as you recognize the crouching stance from Survey Corps notes, the preamble to the Armored Titan's deadly barreling blow.

 Barely holding now, those cables aren't going to tolerate another shock, much less an intentional, powerful one.

"Just start firing!" Jean screams from the roof.

Munitions explode forward, raining absolutely everywhere except on the Armored Titan. Shrieking, you and Connie flee from under an awning as it comes tumbling down from the line of fire.

Spurring the draft horse drawing the cart, Marco sends the entire clunky apparatus flying forth. The cart hurtles down the uneven cobblestones, wheels shuddering against the craterous footprints left by the Armored Titan. Gritting her teeth, Sasha grabs the edge of the cart to keep balance while cramming whatever cannonballs she can reach.

In a whirlwind of smoke and fire, four of them blast into the Armored Titan's left shoulder with a satisfying succession of thuds. Its shoulder twitches with every blow.

"Quickly, reload!" you plead.

As the smoke finally clears, your heart stops. Not a dent, not even a scratch was carved into the damn thing. Nothing to mark your desperate, last-ditch efforts at saving humanity. Munitions roll down the Armored Titan's back as if they were little more than droplets of water, tumbling to the ground below.

Relentless, the Armored Titan hurtles forward.

Neither blades nor cannons, neither veterans nor new recruits, absolutely nothing will stop this force of nature. Connie stares slackjawed. Tears streaming down your cheeks, you begin hyperventilating as you acknowledge the inevitable: The Armored Titan is going to plow into Wall Sina.

Today will seal the end of humanity as you know it. You have nowhere left to go, no refuge you can seek from these unstoppable monsters who seem destined to exterminate humanity.

This is the end.

You feel it, the moment in which all of your squad's hopes shatter. The remaining cables don't even try to put up a fight, erupting as the Armored Titan shatters the metal web you had nailed all of
your faith on.

A mighty roar reverberates in the alley you're standing in.

At the final minute, your instincts kicks into action, allowing you to shake Connie awake from his daze and launch hooks into the roof. Had you lingered a second longer, you would have been crushed.

A second Titan comes careening down the alley, following the Armored Titan. As you scramble up the shingles, you wonder why you even bother. Armin tried to warn you. Jean tried to warn you. The sunny idealism that you once prided yourself on has come back to haunt you. As you find yourself caught between two of nature's most fearsome predators, Captain Levi's words echo in your mind, the last thing you'll ever hear:

"This world is going to chew you up and spit you out."

All you can do is watch the second Titan as it thunders towards you and your squad. There is no point in running; after all, where would you run to? Wall Sina will collapse any minute now.

Releasing another deafening roar, the Titan raises its fists.

... plowing them straight into the Armored Titan.

It takes you a couple seconds to realize that you've been holding your breath. You don't believe your eyes. Lined with lean muscle, this Titan continues hammering punches, the force of the blows crumpling the Armored Titan to its knees. Blinking your tears away, you study this newcomer, rampaging in the center of what was once the town square.

"Is that Titan... attacking another Titan?" Annie mutters, looking positively mesmerized.

Beating fists and kicks rain down onto the Armored Titan. With each potent attack, the Armored Titan is dug further and further into the ground, pushed into a grave. Large, plated arms guard its head as the onslaught rages on.

"P-praise the Walls," you whisper, only to start sobbing as you clasp your hands together in thanks. The Walls have sent you a miracle, one that might just let you see your family again.

"The same Walls this asshole's buddy broke in two seconds!" Connie yells in frustration. "Fuck the Walls! They don't do anything, we do!"

Jean, Sasha and Marco come to join you, each as paralyzed with surprise as you are.

"Shut up!" you shriek, turning on Connie in fury. "Those Walls have guarded our families for
"Yours maybe, Mitras bitch!" Connie roars. "Don't think we don't know why you're so obsessed with protecting Wall Sina!"

Wrapping an arm against his shoulders, Jean tugs Connie into chest, pulling him into a side-hug and away from you.

All of their eyes are upon you and your cheeks flush with shame. These are all survivors of the first attack on Wall Maria, five years ago. If any of them have family members remaining, they're going to be living within this Wall, Wall Rose. None of your comrades have the luxury of knowing their families are completely safe, tucked away in Mitras, like you do. Nevertheless, they chose to courageously execute your plan instead of abandoning everything to search and evacuate their own families.

Swallowing hard, you mumble out an apology, and nobody responds. You know full well what they are thinking, and you can't blame them.

Plumes of steam explode from the town square, capturing all of your attention. The Armored Titan is nowhere to be found. With its prey having vanished, the green-eyed abnormal plods back the way it came, roaring in demand of new targets as it thunders past you.

"How the hell are we supposed to defend against an enemy that comes and goes whenever it fucking pleases?!" Jean gripes, running his hand through his hair in frustration. "It's impossible!"

Only a few days ago, you had been tucked asleep on cot in the female barracks, cold and rigid but safe. Wake up, go to training, eat, sleep and repeat. There was a rhythm guiding life, one that made sense. Now, you stand on top of a roof with shingles plinking to the ground, surrounded by meters of rubble and smoke and devastation.

"A-at any rate, we should probably get moving," you mutter. "Let's head back south and help with the evacuation efforts."

Just as you all begin to check your holsters and re-tighten the harnesses, the wind carries a soft voice over the roof.

"...there's no need."

Bulging blue eyes and jaw gaping slack greet you. You almost mistake him for a titan.

Armin sinks to his knees, babbling out broken words. Sasha rushes to soothe him, crouching down and rubbing slow circles on his back. When he can finally be convinced to speak, it's the last thing you want to hear.

Chapter End Notes

Congrats on making it this far! Wanted to put this chapter out despite not yet responding to the comments, because the next week is pretty busy, so thank you for your patience!
A couple of notes, my dears:

(1) So that I won't bore you with simply rehashing AoT arcs, I'm going to add my own personal twists. The same major events hold true, but otherwise anything can happen within the parameters of reality set by the manga.

(2) When reading this chapter, please keep in mind that Reader is pretty much the only character who has never before seen a Titan in the flesh, given that she grew up in Mitras all her life. So, as much as I like Reader, I thought it would be more realistic to have her panic more than her comrades, who have all been exposed to Titans previously. I mean, let's be real, if there are flesh-eating humanoid giants chasing after us for the first time in your life, we're going to be terrified. Reader is still incredibly strategic, but I didn't want to make her some kind of OP heroine without any fear.

How are y'all gonna handle Armin's news?!
From Trost, With Love II

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Spoilers ahead. Granted, these are spoilers from the very beginning of the manga/first season of the anime, so I assume most people would know these by now, but just to be safe, thought I'd let you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Over the course of the next few minutes, Armin relates to you and your grim band of mavericks how exactly he came to be stranded in the midst of all this decay and ruin.

Shortly after the Armored Titan's invasion of Wall Rose, your comrades managed to alert Garrison Headquarters. Higher-ups immediately dispatched a Vanguard of junior officers to contain the breach in Wall Rose, and a Middle Guard to evacuate civilians. A stupendous plan.

Theoretically. Because, of course, the Garrison is meant to support the Survey Corps in counter-Titan measures, as necessary.

When none of these Garrison officers have fought a Titan directly in the last 5 years, however, this plan quickly disintegrated. The Vanguard force was overwhelmed in a manner of minutes. With Titans now having overrun the southern-most part of Trost, newly-minted Survey Corps and Garrison graduates were ordered to step up and evacuate as many citizens as possible.

Mikasa, Ymir and Krista filter in to catch the tail end of the story.

"T-they told us the Middle Guard veterans would back u-us up," Armin wails. "That t-they'd bring out more f-fuel as soon as we finished. T-they never came."

The reality of the situation is begin to settle over the group, smothering you with its gravity.

"...So what does that mean...?" Marco asks.

It means a stomach-turning tally: Eren Jaeger, who fearlessly took on the Colossal Titan, sacrificed his life to save Armin. Every squad of Survey Corps and Garrison graduates sent out to replace the Vanguard was all but slaughtered. Reiner and Bertolt remain missing.

The group devolves into a tense silence, save for Armin's racking sobs.
When Commander Erwin told you, so many moons ago, that the Survey Corps would demand a lifetime commitment, you didn't really believe him. Certainly, you appreciated there was risk involved, but there was risk involved in almost anything interesting. Never could you imagine what coming face-to-face with these wondrous and terrible beasts would be like, the crushing weight of these impossible odds. Logically, there was no reason to expect saving of any kind. Eren certainly didn't receive any.

And yet, your puny but pure efforts to save Wall Sina had been rewarded by some freak Titan who took down the enemy you had no hope of slaying. Who could have possibly foreseen that? It was your and your friends' attacking of the Armored Titan that- while not directly effective- stalled it long enough for that Abnormal to come and wreak havoc. Your intentions, your actions, all of it had added up to make a profound difference.

Besides, you'd hate to waste all the big guy's hard work.

"Some of us believe that we save the Walls, others believe that the Walls save us," you begin. Granted, you're the only one in the latter category but you're trying to be poetic here. "Regardless of what you believe, our actions today helped save the last bastion humanity has against the Titans. We need to get back to Wall Sina ASAP so we can rub it in everyone's faces."

"And how exactly do you propose we do that?" Annie says. "Most of us are almost completely out of fuel. And even if those of us with fuel each carry someone, that leaves the rest here defenseless and surrounded. It's hopeless."

She has a valid point; Armin, Mikasa, Ymir, Krista, Marco and Sasha are hovering dangerously close to empty. You chew your lip in thought. "Well, why can't you guys just siphon fuel from the rest of us?"

"Still wouldn't be enough to get us all back," Connie points out.

You're quickly growing irritated with the constant pessimism. Each solution you offer is being beaten down from every angle, with no alternatives offered. "So the only thing standing between us and survival is fuel? Are we really going to let this be the way we go out?"

"Did humanity have a choice in any of this, to begin with?" Armin answers glumly.

Between nearly having your home wiped out by nature's fiercest predator, this group loathing your Mitrassian heritage and that devastatingly attractive demon-spawn's mind games, you really don't have the patience for this pipsqueak's existential bullshit.

"Yes, in absolutely everything!" You snap, patience buckling like battered gates giving way to a flood. "We chose to hunt down the Armored Titan, and ultimately stopped it. You chose to help slay Titans and evacuate civilians. Now, you can choose to die here alone and miserable or figure out where to find more fuel. SO CHOOSE!"

Jean steps up to your challenge. "I choose some ear muffs because you've absolutely deafened me," he retorts, ruffling your hair. "Did we suffer Shadis's ugly mug for a year just to sit on our asses and die now? Come on, you dolts, let's think of something."

"You just don't wanna die a virgin," Connie translates, smirking.

"At least I could get laid, Melon-Head!" Jean snaps.

Over their bickering, Ymir informs you that there is a military supply depot located in the area...
nearby. She has a vague idea where it is, but is unsure of the distance, which concerns you.

"Guys," you cry out, clapping your hands for their attention. "Before we go, you should siphon some of our fuel-

Jean wants to know if "siphoning fuel" is all you're capable of thinking about.

"Why are you talking to me when you could be siphoning fuel?" You inquire.

An explosion of glass rings out in the abandoned streets as your tiny battalion smashes through the windows of the supply depot. Jean takes the brunt of the impact, a trail of infinite glittering shards streaking past him. As you sail in behind him, you duck your head into your arms to avoid them.

Your journey here was a short but peculiar one; wherever your group hurtled through the streets, the green-eyed Abnormal from before would follow. Against its most fundamental Titan instincts however, its appetite was not for you, but for the run-of-the-mill Titans stalking your every move. Annie insists on staying to watch its progress, but the rest of you refuse. If she wants to stick out like sore thumb in territory overrun by Titans, she will do so alone.

Even now, a low rumble emits from the Abnormal's throat as eerie jade eyes watch you from outside the building. Occasionally, it turns its attention to bat at another Titan approaching, before dutifully returning to its post, ever-watching your group.

Well, you've always wanted a pet.

Wood scrapes against the floor, jolting you out of your stupor. You snap your attention back to the bowels of the supply depot, but Jean reacts faster. Lightning-quick and just as precise, he lunges forward and dives behind an overturned desk. The scuffle lasts mere seconds before Jean drags out his trophy, lifting him into the air by the collar.

Crisp amber fabric catches your eye and your jaw drops open. An all too familiar jacket, matching yours except for the coat of arms: a dark shield from which grow entwined roses.

"You fucking worms," Jean roars, bodily shaking him. The man's skull rockets back and forth so hard you think it's going to break cleanly from his neck. "Traitors, the lot of you! Any idea how many of us died because you were too busy pissing your pants?!!"

The Middle Guard wasn't devoured by Titans, like you all had assumed. Wasn't doomed to a grisly fate, crushed to pieces in between ungodly maws, like the other Survey Corps graduates or the Vanguard. How could they be, when all this time they had been cowering in the dark silence of the supply depot? Marco rushes forward, struggling to pry Jean's hands off the man, to no avail.

"Wasn't it a Garrison Captain who claimed desertion is a capital offense? 'Punishable by execution', weren't those the terms?" Jean hisses, lip curling in a snarl as he elbows Marco back. "Wouldn't want to stand in the way of justice, now would I?"

The warmth has been utterly extinguished from his eyes, as barren as the abandoned city outside. Frustration, sorrow and desperation: you've seen all of these flow through Jean at one point or another. Never such pure, unadulterated rage, contorting his handsome features into something
utterly alien. Marco and Connie struggle to restrain him while you and Sasha coo soft reassurances, reminding him of your plight. You don't have time to pursue grudges now, however much these backstabbers might deserve it.

You're shoved aside by broad shoulders you never thought you'd see again.

"Leave some fun for us, won't you Kirsh Scout?" Reiner growls, clapping an arm across Jean's back as Bertolt sidles up behind them.

The edges of your vision start blur; you release a breath you didn't know you were holding. You never thought you'd actually miss that giant sociopathic bear, but here he is, in the flesh! Looking weary and fearsome and annoyed all at once. You would tackle him in a hug if he hadn't spazzed and seriously injured your arm all those weeks ago. Instead, you settle for a relieved smile as they are mobbed by your friends. That Abnormal saving you from the Armored Titan, your group making it in one piece to the supply depot and now discovering Reiner and Bertolt alive! Two of the 104th Training Corps absolute best and brightest! You've been given more than enough advantages to struggle onwards. Reminding your group of this, you collect them and as many of the Middle Guard you can guilt-trip into joining you, before descending the dark, winding steps to the armory.

With renewed focus, Jean takes point while Bertolt brings up the rear. Precious few torches have been maintained, and you keep your eyes fixed on the heels of Jean's boots to avoid stumbling down spiraling stairs. As you brush your fingers across the walls to keep steady, the stones flutter beneath your hands and you freeze. As those following you demand to know what the holdup is, strangled moans echo off the walls, vibrating the stones.

"You don't think...." Armin trails off.

"Shit," Jean answers.

"We have no choice but to go forward," you insist. "If they've infiltrated the basement, they can't be that large anyways. Nothing we can't take care of."

When your group finally arrives to the balcony overseeing the armory, seven 4-meter-class Titans await you. Torchlight glows orange along their rows of teeth, each larger than your skull. Cylindrical tanks of fuel stand only meters below you, tantalizingly close but guarded by these unnatural beasts.

You dig your nails into the railing just as the observation platform gives a shudder. Even as the Titans mill about, the basement shakes with each of their steps, and you're reminded yet again of just how impossible the mission you've dedicated your life to really is.

Groaning with the force of the tremor, the central elevator leading from this balcony down to the armory sways in the air.

"If we're going to do anything, we need to act now," Mikasa observes. "The integrity of the structure has already been compromised."

If the Walls have blessed you thus far, than they have also crafted a cruel joke at your expense. The weakest class of Titans stand before you, stand between you and freedom. Under normal circumstances, the most experienced of the group could slay them without breaking a sweat. Yet, without fuel to power your equipment, you're reduced to little more than cowering prey.

The dwindling time is what finally restores Armin to the ruthless strategist you have all come to
know and love. Scattered about the observation deck is artillery galore: rifles, cannons and fodder. Therefore, Armin determines, if some of you are lowered down into the elevator as bait, you can lure the Titans to the center of the armory before blinding them with the rifles. The best seven of you will then swing down from the rafters, armed only with 3DMG blades, and finish the kill. One-on-one.

"I-i'm sorry to have to do this to you," Armin says. "But Mikasa, Annie, Reiner, Bertolt, Jean, Connie and Sasha- you're the most capable 3DMG operators we have. Can we trust you to handle the killing?"

He doesn't say it, but you know what prevents you from making this group of elites, and your pride is badly stung. You know full well you're better with 3DMG blades than at least 3 of the people on that list. Or you were, prior to the Third Advanced Exercise. Beneath the sleeves of your jacket, the scar coursing up your right arm pulses, and you grind your teeth in aggravation.

"Just focus on taking out their eyes, and leave everything else to us," Reiner says, grinning. You marvel at how he's able to remain in such high spirits, give the circumstances. Catching your admiration, he winks at you, scooping up your hand to meet his lips. "Don't fret, (F/N). I'd never let anything happen to you."

Except your sociopathic teammate, you think, forcing a smile.

Weeks ago, you would have laughed at the idea of fearing a puny, 4-meter-class Titan. During training, you'd faced wooden cutouts far larger than that. Not to mention, Bertolt practically qualified as a fortress himself, and against him you had charged full-force.

But now, as you're lowered on a creaking elevator into a sea of cavernous jaws, you begin to seriously reconsider your sense of humor. You find no mirth in their rumbling growls, in the putrid stench of gunpowder, sweat and something distinctly Titan. Death reflects in those glassy eyes, and you realize you've finally caught their attention.

"Not yet!" Armin whispers. "Wait until they're in range!"

Drunken stumbling corrects into sharp pursuit. Far too quickly for your liking, two Titans begin heading your way as the elevator continues its descent. The sudden change in their direction attracts the notice of the other beasts. Whoever is standing with their back to you is shaking, you can feel their trembling spine. Fearing for their aim, you elbow some sense into them. You only get one shot at this.

Five Titans are now heading your way. You grip the rifle so hard the skin across your knuckles is stretched pale.


Condensation beads along the metal column of the elevator as the Titans approach, flooding the area with oppressive heat. The faces of two of them are now large enough to completely blind you to anything else.

"Ready," Armin whispers.

You hope against all hope that those beady eyes aren't the last thing you see.

"Aim."
Concentrating on the looming pupils before you, twin black oceans, you adjust the height of the rifle. Prepare yourself for the recoil.

Empty air beneath your feet is the first thing you notice.

Then kick in the explosions. Terrified screams. The roar of collapsing wood.

Legs dangling in midair, you shriek, clawing your way up the wooden platform that once formed the base of the elevator. Bodies that weren't as quick to react spill out on either side of you, plummeting to the floor of the armory. Thundering steps rush after them.

You struggle to make sense of the chaos you have found yourself in. Just as Armin had issued his final command, the elevator lurched, a nauseating shake before the floor of the elevator completely gave out on one side.

*Your side.*

Of the three of you stationed on that side, only you remain, fingers scrabbling at broken wooden planks and legs swaying loosely in the air. The rest of the rifle-bearers are mobbing the opposite side of the elevator, holding onto the remaining metal columns for dear life. By the time you realize what has happened, bloodcurdling squelches deafen your ears. Bone is crushed to splinters.

Titans are feasting on those of you who fell out. *Orange jackets with a shield of roses.*

You didn't know them.

Armin's plan is rapidly unraveling, with only three blinded Titans to show for it. Your world is plunged into anguished screams and smoke; you can't tell which of your comrades on the rafters dove in haphazardly. All you know is that others remain on the rafters, shouting in confusion, while Armin and the rest of your cohort are hanging onto elevator and struggling to ward off the attention of the Titans.

Armin notices before you do.

Your weakened right arm is shaking, straining with the force of holding onto the splintered wood for so long.

Wrapping an arm about the metal column behind him, he leans forward on the remaining elevator floor and stretches a hand out to where you hang. "*(F/N), Grab my hand!*," he hollers.

Heat drifts up your legs. Sharp ridges inch into your shins for a heartbeat before you realize. Screeching, you snap your legs up as high as they will go; the air from the Titan's jaws slamming shut brushes the back of your thighs. Against your instincts, you glance down, past your kicking feet. A lolling tongue spills out the side of its maws, saliva pouring down. Serrated white mountains hover beneath you, sharp and unforgiving.

"*Come on, (F/N)! Quickly!*" Armin screams.
Shoving your right shoulder forward, you reach as far as you possibly can as Armin struggles to meet you halfway. Fingertips just barely brush the air in front of his hand. Heart pounding, you realize you don't have the strength to haul yourself up.

Glancing back over your shoulder, you find Titan is crouching down, rather than pawing at you.

This, as it turns out, is not a normal Titan.

You only have a handful of seconds for your next move. Abandoning Armin's hand, you throw yourself off the elevator, as far out to the side as you can. Hurtling through the air like an uncoiled spring, the Titan leaps upward through the air, missing your descent by millimeters. Its chin slams into the fractured elevator, sending it spinning like it was no more than a windchime as your comrades shriek in fear.

Relaxing your muscles, you careen down. Knees braced for the fall, you drop into a crouch and roll forward to your feet. Before you can appreciate the five massive corpses littering the floor and boiling away, the ground undulates beneath you and you take off.

The Jumping Titan is back with a growing appetite.

Reaching for your 3DMG gear, your hands meet only air. As you dart through the armory, dodging the plodding footsteps behind you, you belatedly realize you left them on the balcony, along with half of the rest of your group, to ease the weight that would be put on the mediocre elevator.

The ground gives a sickening lurch before a boom rings out across the armory, knocking you off of your feet with the impact. Stones dig into your spine as you are rammed into the wall.

Apparently, Jumping Titan comes in horizontal leap-of-death mode as well! Will wonders never cease.

Dragging yourself to your knees and elbows, you survey the menace that landed just in front of you, reviewing your options. Without blades at your disposal, you have absolutely no idea how you will counter the rapidly gaining beast in front of you. Glancing to the commotion at the far end of the armory, you realize that the slaying crew is too preoccupied trying to eliminate the one other Titan that remains. Armin and the elevator crew are locked in place.

There is no one else you can count on to come to your aid.

Jumping Titan stalks toward you, dropping to its haunches as it reaches forward. A meaty fist sails through the air, fingers outstretched like a net. Breaking out into a sprint, you run straight for its hand. Heel landing on its pinky, you rapidly scale its fingers one by one, just as they close into a fist. Landing on the knuckle of its thumb, you dart forward, ascending its arm and leaping past its shoulder.

If you can't slay it, your only hope is to incapacitate it.

Hurdling over the predator hunting you, you tear through the armory, aiming for the elevator. Throwing yourself at the ground, your eyes desperately scour the area.

Behind you, earth-shaking footsteps pick up the pace.
You burrow into the rubble, splinters pricking at your hands. There must be one of them left somewhere around here. Dusky light dances off the trigger guard; you've finally found your prize. Seizing the discarded rifle, you whirl around.

Propping an elbow on a bent knee, you take aim. Warmth burns into your skin as the enormous source of heat charges forward.

You squint one eye shut, bones nearly jolting out of your skin with each of the Jumping Titan's movements.

Twitching finger muscles are screaming at you to pull the trigger right then and there but you force yourself still. It takes all of your self-control to steel your nerves, quiet your raging heart. With its jaw looming over you, you fire.

The first bullet clips its ear, before continuing harmlessly on its way. Unhindered, Jumping Titan clambers forward.

"(F/N) GET OUT OF THE WAY!!" Jean roars.

Drowning out his orders, you take aim, hands surprisingly free of any tremor. You fire again.

This time, Jumping Titan jerks back. With a resounding boom, the bullet has tunneled right into its pupil. You're showered with warm, gooey bits of slurry whose origin you'd rather not think about, not that you have the time. Leaping up, you ram the butt of the rifle to blind the other eye. Jumping Titan roars, clumsily groveling on its knees.

Before you can celebrate your victory, a weighty palm knocks you across the back. A tree might as well have fallen on you; the blow collapses you to your knees, breath stolen from your lungs. Your chin thuds into the armory floor.

"Someone get her out!"

You may have blinded Jumping Titan, but it's still fully functional. As you thrash beneath the palm pinning you down, a gaping jaw approaches.

"She's too close! We won't make it!"

Gobs of saliva splash down, matting your hair. Soaking your neck and shoulders.

You can feel it, something cutting into your side. Screwing your eyes shut, you shriek for mercy.
With inescapable force, you're wrenched forward into something warm and hard.

When you open your eyes, you discover that Jumping Titan smiling at you as it lies on the floor of the armory. Dead. You note that you're swaddled in Bertolt's arms, and as he pats your back, you begin to piece everything together. He sliced away the Titan fingers that caged you, scraping your side in the process with his blade. Reiner took care of the nape. The stocky blonde remains perched upon the mountain that was once Jumping Titan, gazing down at you with an unreadable expression.

You decide that these are two of the most wonderful and compassionate human beings you've ever had the pleasure of knowing. Thank the Walls they are on your side.

"B-bertolt," you mutter, beckoning him forward.

Bottle-green eyes dart to yours, concerned. "Y-yes?"

"C-closer," you croak out, tilting your chin up to him.

"You okay?" Bertolt whispers, leaning into you. You cough weakly in response. "(F/N), please answer me."

"F-first a kitchen knife, then a 3DMG blade. Are you going to use a cannon against me next?"

Jean barks out a laugh. Eyes narrowed, Bertolt leaves you in under Jean's care.

...Which translates into Bertolt shoving you, snickering all the while, into Jean's waiting arms. Your nose smacks into Jean's shoulder, but you don't mind much. Right now, the look of disgust on Bertolt's face is all you need, healing away any pain.

Seven Titans infiltrated the armory; you have eliminated all of them. Two Middle Guard Garrison soldiers perished, but the rest of you survived. All in all, a miraculous result. The group extracts as much fuel from the tanks as your equipment will allow; the remaining Middle Guard veterans that had joined you decide to set off for Mitras first. They depart in small, quiet groups, advising you to do the same. The more of you leave at once, the more attention you'll attract from the Titans. They bid you farewell and thank you, taking off as smoothly and uniformly as flocks migrating for the change of seasons.

You wonder when you'll reach that caliber of skill.

In the time it takes for the vets to clear out, each of you take it upon yourselves to double and triple check your neighbors' gauges; if you are to make it back to Wall Sina alive, there is no margin for error.

Just as you're bouncing on your knees, loosening your joints for flight, Mikasa darts off the roof. You're about to chide her for ditching her squad when your jaw drops open. You wrench forward whoever is standing next to you, just to make sure they are seeing this too.
"Something else you want to tell me, (F/-" Bertolt starts, before falling silent.

Out of the bloody, tangled sinews of the Abnormal that saved you, an unconscious Eren emerges. A sobbing Mikasa is dusting him off, smoothing his hair, as though somehow her hands are enough to wash away the stench of death and life that he has been submerged in.

"Armin, grab her and Eren and go," Jean urges. "She'll listen to you. Before more Titans start showing up."

Jean has the right idea. Recovering Eren has brought tears to your eyes, but you have no time to lose. Rounding up the rest of your cohort, you order squads to begin taking off, before grabbing Jean and leaving.

The carcass has boiled away to mostly bone now, ribs peeking out from the dissolving mass of flesh. Dusky afternoon light glints off the bone.

"Still think it was hasty?" Reiner declares in Bertolt's ear, slapping an arm across his back

Bertolt drives his heel into the shingles, jaw clenching. He keeps his eyes on the cobbled streets below. "You could have been caught," he hisses. "It's a wonder they didn't catch you exiting the Armored Titan. Especially now that they know about Shifters."

Bertolt releases a rich peel of laughter. Low and deep, it bounces throughout the deserted alleyways. "The Rogue Titan has presented itself to us. We would have never found it, had we kept waiting like you wanted. Grow a pair, Bert."

"Eren Jeager," murmurs Annie, sidling up to them. "Who would have thought..."

"Cool it, Leonheart," Reiner spits in disgust. "They're gonna see you blushing from space, lusting after these Eldian devils like you are. What a damn disgrace."

Bertolt shrugs off Reiner's arm. "We'd better get going," he mutters. "We can't keep together like this, just the three of us. If one of us is compromised, it'll drag the other two down."

"Relax, Bert, what do you have-"

From behind them, a shingle clinks down, followed by a sharp gasp. Eyes widened, Annie spins around, darting to the peak of the roof. Reiner rushes to join her. Clinging to the other side of the roof, is a horrified Marco, hands poised over his gear. With nauseating speed, Reiner forces him to his knees, bowing Marco down by the force of the headlock.

"H-how could you?" Marco splutters. "Reiner, 'Big Brother Reiner', how could you? How could you?"

With unnerving tenderness, Reiner shushes him. "Easy now," he coos. "We'll grant you an honorable death."

Marco pleads for his life, sobbing. "I p-promise, I won't tell anyone!"

"Annie," Reiner purrs, tightening his grip. "Time to demonstrate your loyalty."

From his position on the edge of the roof, Bertolt hasn't moved an inch. He keeps watching the
dissolving Rogue Titan, from the tumbling shingles to the wailing sobs to the hushed false platitudes. From roaring flesh to silent bone. As they all will soon become. Long after the sun has set, and they slip back into the ranks, all Bertolt can see is glistening bone, stark and blinding white.

Chapter End Notes

He's been absent to give the Reader a chance to show off her chops, but don't you worry. Levi comes back next chapter.

With a *vengeance.*

*If you catch my drift.* (°შ°)

...do you catch my drift? It was an implication of..., stuff, by the way.
Thank you all so much for the support, everyone! I love reading your thoughts, and I know I'm definitely behind on answering comments, but I really wanted to crank out this chapter in particular, and it's been tough to squeeze in time to write in between family obligations and school. Just want you to know that I sincerely appreciate all the time and effort you put into them! <3

What better way to celebrate finals than to publish a massive chapter? This chapter is dedicated to anexartita.

Oh, and keep an eye on the little scroll bar on the right; I would recommend listening to "Desire" by Meg Meyers once there are about two finger widths left between the scroll bar and the end. This is for a scene a little ways down following the 7th page break (by my count, 1st break starts after the chapter picture).

Bon apetit ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
By the time news reaches Commander Erwin and he orders an immediate retreat from the 56th Expedition, word has already spread within the ranks of the Garrison. Whispers of traitor, legend and spy dog your group's heels as you and the other Survey Corps trainees try to find a niche within the Garrison. It does little good; the lot of you are labeled dangerous. The Garrison soldiers whom you just united with to clear the supply depot are only too happy to avoid you. Nothing assuages their fears, not even when Eren manages to shift into the Rogue Titan once more and uses a boulder to seal the breach within Wall Rose.

What sends your mind reeling is that, somehow, no consequences await the Middle Guard veterans who betrayed you. Similarly unscathed is the Military Police leadership, who selfishly diverted elite Garrison soldiers to their cause while dumping the responsibility of slaying Titans...
onto novices. No, not a scratch on any of them. **Eren Yeager**, however, who charged the Colossal Titan while everyone else was paralyzed with fear, who saved you from the Armored Titan and who salvaged Wall Rose, will stand trial for his evident crime of Titan Shifting. As for the rest of you who liberated the supply depot, slayed Titans and evacuated civilians?

You're treated as little more than criminals.

Garrison Commander Dot Pixis and Military Police Commander Nile Dok issue immediate gag orders. Each of you who saw Eren emerging from the Rogue Titan are taken into custody, isolated in barracks far-removed from the rest of your ranks. Beneath the frigid gaze of two Military Police soldiers who refused to introduce themselves, you wait in silence. One by one, your friends disappear to give their testimony at the courthouse. First Mikasa. Then Armin. Next is Sasha. You realize they are summoning you by surname.

None of them return to the barracks. As the hours drag on, you become a mess of crackling, frenetic energy, much to the annoyance of your guards: shifting from foot to foot, sitting down, standing up, trying to catch the eyes of the remaining trainees.

The only warning you get is an MP nudging your shoulder, and suddenly it's your turn to be ushered in behind heavy wooden doors. Under other circumstances, you'd admire the craftsmanship of the courthouse's gleaming marble. Today, the tall, imposing columns intimidate you into silence, even though it's not your fate on the line. You've never done anything to merit formal discipline before; you can only wonder what Eren must be going through.

Speaking of the Shifter.

Frenzied jade eyes meet yours, anxious. He lies on his knees, arms chained behind his back to a pole at the heart of the room. You can't help the horrified look that crosses your features; with the gravity of these proceedings, Eren may as well have murdered a high-ranking official, rather than save mankind. You don't realize that you've come to a complete stop, until the MP behind you shoves you forward towards the stand. From the Judge's Podium, a spectacled, elderly man in stately dark robes watches you grimly. On the copper nameplate, you read a dizzying series of titles:

**The Honorable Judge Darius Zackly**

**General of the Armed Forces**

**Saviour of the Holy Walls, Eye of the King**

This is the supreme leader of all three military branches, second in power only to the man who reigns over all three Walls, King Fritz himself. You gulp.

"Private!" Commander Dok bellows. Of course, they'd let the head of the **Military Police** run the show, to the exclusion of the other two branches. On either side of him stand Commander Erwin and Commander Pixis, silent and stone-faced. "Introduce yourself to the court, if you would."
"(F-F/N) (L/N), graduate of the 104th Training Corps, recently inducted into the Survey Corps," you say. It started out a little shaky, but you regain your footing quickly.

Nile Dok, who you once thought looked handsome if you were to turn your head and squint in low-light conditions, hold no punches. The cross-examination is relentless, hunting for every detail about Eren Yeager.

His background, associates, demeanor during your training days?

Your background, associates, demeanor during training days?

How long have you known the defendant?

Was the defendant involved in any violent incidents, during the time that you knew him?

Had the defendant shown any signs of antisocial behavior? Homicidal urges? Cannibalism?

Are you sure?

Do you believe you're fit to stand trial, after the events of the Battle of Trost?

Perhaps you're traumatized, and are unable to remember the incidents involving the defendant as they occurred?

Can you truly remember everything? Can we rely on your word?

Just as you emerge from Dok's verbal battering, Minister Nick dives in. You've gone to a few of his sermons with your family during the holidays. You've never been introduced to him personally, but if you can evoke your family's connection to the Church of the Walls, you just might be able to curry favor with him and turn the tide around. Perhaps he even remembers you.

"Ms. (L/N)," Minister Nick murmurs, mulling over the files before him. "That's a Mitrassian surname, correct? Of noble origin?"

You breathe a sigh of relief. "Yes, sir. Daughter of (Father's Name, L/N) and (Mother's Name, L/N)."

Long fingers stroke graying stubble as he surveys you from his perch next to Commander Dok. "You were raised entirely in Mitras, I take it?"

You're not sure why your pedigree has suddenly become of such importance, but you are quick to agree with him, sycophantically pointing out that your family has devoted itself to the Church over the years.

He gives you a tight-lipped smile. "Wonderful, wonderful. I do enjoy seeing our youth honor tradition."

For the briefest second, you exchange a small smile with Eren.

"...but it breaks my heart to see a lady of such high-breeding cavort around with nonbelievers," he drawls. "Ascending the walls, breaking bread with heretics, defending a beast! Perhaps the unenlightened can be forgiven, but you know better, Ms. (L/N), than to violate what is sacred. These deaths are blood on your hands, righteous punishment for your grotesque sins!"
Murmurs ripple across the court and you can't help but gape at him. This punitive, rigid dogma is nowhere near the tradition you were raised with. Completely contradicts the hymns your mother taught you to sing about never giving up, about joining hands with your neighbors in the service of humanity. Verses about how even the tiniest stone makes a difference, forming a part of the mountainous Walls that guard your people. No, no Minister Nick must have misunderstood you. This can't be.

"S-sir, I was raised to love the Walls, thank the Walls, honor the Walls every dawn and eve," you plead. "The cannons mounted on the Walls are necessary to our survival! Joining the Survey Corps is the ultimate sacrifice to continue the legacy of the Walls!"

Minister Nick shoves past Commander Dok, storming up to the stand. Bony knuckles slam down, constricting the wooden balustrade that separates you from the rest court, as he dives into your face. You're forced to lean back.

"Faithless hussy!" Minister Nick hisses, and you wince at the spit that lands on your cheek. "How easily the weak abandon their values! What games did that abomination play with your mind, your body, to convince you to join his creed? To forsake your heritage?!"

Your eye twitches.

"Objection Your Honor," Erwin calls out, rising to his feet. "Counsel is antagonizing the witness."

Walls, how you've missed that regal voice of is, that effortless composure. His tranquility seeps into you, refocusing you on your goal and cooling your nerves before you do something rash.

"Sustained. Minister Nick, that's quite enough," Judge Zackly growls. "Step away from the witness immediately."

If the minister has heard the judge, he gives no indication. Rather, he maintains his vicious gaze on you until he is good and ready. Just as he turns to leave, dark robes billowing after him, you pipe up.

"Your vestments, Minister, are magnificent."

From over his shoulder, he tosses you a look of disgust. "Groveling ill-suits a true believer, my child."

"With all due respect sir, I was being observant," you reply, somewhat louder. "Not groveling. Such a rich, dark color. Do you know where it comes from, Minister? The black dye? Logwood, which must be combined with a certain metal to achieve the precise jet-black of your robes. Very difficult to come by."

You can't recall if the courtroom was this silent the entire time you have occupied the stand, but the emptiness seems to stretch for meters around you. Motionless in their seats, the surrounding audience may as well have been an oil painting. Still and deathly quiet.

"Idle-hands are the sinners plaything, child," Minister Nick snarls. "If you have a point-"

"Oh, I do," you chirp with a bright smile. "I give you my word that I do. See, my mother is tailor, Minister. She taught me, much like you did Minister Nick, that the Church of the Walls values hard work. A way to honor the tireless efforts of our ancestors who built the Walls over many decades. Similarly, the exact process of achieving black dye is incredibly difficult. Exhausting. Lengthy. An undertaking meant for expert textile makers only, who in turn, must obtain their sources from
expert loggers and expert blacksmiths. A chain of dedicated master laborers, able to fulfill their duties only because of the safety granted by Wall Sina and Wall Rose. The Walls that Eren Yeager is almost singularly responsible for saving. In other words, if it weren't for Eren Yeager, those pretty, delicate robes of yours would be soaked to the chest in blood red. Is my point clear, Minister? I'm happy to clarify further if otherwise."

Several things happen at once. Minister Nick turns on you, screeching and spittle-flying as he lambasts your heretic ways. The military tribunal has come to resemble meat days at the Mess Hall, pulsing with an incomprehensible chorus of arguments. Clangs break out across the room as Judge Zackly slams his gavel down, demanding order.

"Private (L/N), thank you for your testimony," he seethes. "We've heard all we need to from you. Good day."

Before you can thank him for his time, you are hauled out of your seat and escorted off of the premises. These MP guards really miss no opportunity to demonstrate the extent of their distaste for you, dragging you along tiled floors. As the crowd blurs together, you manage to catch one face but you have to blink to make certain you have correctly identified those twinkling blue eyes and golden hair.

Erwin gives you the briefest wink.

Once you are released from your duties at the courthouse, you discover where the rest of your fellow trainees have gone: cleaning up the corpses lining the cobbled streets Trost. While you have always understood the dismal survival rates associated with a life of service in the Survey Corps, you never imagined that retrieval of your fallen comrades would count as one of your responsibilities. Wrapping shrouds around mangled flesh in the eerie quiet of the alleyways. Struggling to keep a cloth over your nose as you move around to squelch the stench of death and decay. Carrying stretchers while trying to touch as little of them as possible.

It's unsettling.

Especially when you and Jean stumble across the half-chewed body of one Marco Bodt.

Jean releases a bloodcurdling wail and you immediately come sprinting, blades waving and eyes blazing, until you skid to a halt and wish you had run to his side. The others, they were different. You didn't know them, could manage dissociating yourself from the disturbing labor you were carrying out. Just another day in the life of a Survey Corps soldier, cleaning like always.

A single glassy hazel eye and smattering of freckles ruins absolutely everything. Doubling over, you begin dry-heaving, and continue doing so long after the contents of your stomach refuse to come out. Fingers digging into his skull, Jean sinks to his knees.

"H-how...the fuck did we completely miss him?" he says hoarsely. "He was right behind us. When did he..? How?"

"I don't know, I don't know, idon'tknow," you chant, as if it will make more sense the eighty-fourth time around.

Marco, whose optimism emboldened all of you, shining like a beacon during your darkest hours together. Marco, who chose a brutal beating over betraying his allies during the Second Advanced Exercise. Marco, who forgave all of you, even when it wasn't deserved.
"None of us even noticed he was gone," Jean trails off. "Not one."

Quietly, Sasha and Connie step up to the gut-wrenching task; neither you nor Jean take your eyes off of their movements until a wandering Lieutenant barks at you to return to shoveling, that more soldiers are waiting for their shrouds.

"All of them have families we need to get them back to," he says gruffly. "Buck up. We're the Survey Corps. We're the ones people rely on."

The rest of your morbid obligation passes without incident. For once, you're glad the Shadis' brutal training regimen allowed little time for socialization, for getting to know people, getting to love people, who you might lose before you have even noticed.

Once the blood has been scraped off of the cobblestones, you and your comrades are herded into the infirmary to be examined in groups for injuries; a large curtain awaits you, females to the right, males to the left. As you shuck your shirt, you can feel their eyes trail up that streak of angry red that climbs up your arm. Bertolt's lasting gift to you.

The nurse deems you to be in tip-top condition, all things considering. Hovering at the door, you wait for your friends, who arrive next to you one by one. Only Jean doesn't show. Worry surges through you, and you repeatedly ask the overworked doctor if she's absolutely sure all male soldiers have already been examined?

The door slams shut in your face.

"Maybe he already went to get supper?" Connie suggests.

By the time you arrive at the Mess Hall, nearly all the tables are full of celebrating soldiers. The stark contrast to your group's own mood jars you out of your somber brooding. Picking up on bits and pieces of gossip, you learn that, spearheaded by Captain Levi, the Special Operations Squad swooped in to save the day, officially reconquering Trost for humanity.

"The Captain really showed those Garrison wussies who's boss!" one man crows. "You shoulda seen the looks on their faces! Took down three Titans by himself in a heartbeat!"

"About damn time those high-and-mighty Garrisoners stopped lookin' down their noses at us!" his companion answers. "I'd follow that man straight to a Titan's mouth, if he asked it!"

Levi is more than Humanity's Strongest, you realize. More than a Titan-Killing machine. Not that you'd ever admit it aloud, of course, but he's a symbol of hope to the downtrodden and the poor, buoying everyone with the sheer magnitude of his achievement. On his journey from the lowest circles of society, rocketing his way to the elite of the military, Levi had inspired thousands around him.

Turning your attention back to your own table, you rejoin Sasha and Connie's quiet conversation. While you mourn the loss of Marco, the rest of the army is evidently rejoicing in mankind's victory. What a strange dichotomy. It concerns you that you may one day reach such a battle-hardened state, where the loss of a handful of lives means nothing in the grand scheme of things.

"Jean's not here," Sasha notes, craning her neck.

"...Maybe he already ate supper?" Connie supplies helpfully.

While this is indeed a brilliant solution to the problem of the missing Jean, your instincts scream
that something isn't right. Jean is among the most social among you; it's entirely unlike him to miss an opportunity to lord his prowess on the battlefield over all of you. Wolfing down your dinner, the three of you set off to find him. The Barracks are clear. Courtyard is empty. Local training fields and the Shed are explored as a last resort, but also also ruled out. By the time curfew rolls around, your search has failed to turn up those distinctive chestnut brown spikes anywhere. Deciding to postpone your mission until after a good night's rest, you three part ways. Sasha and Connie return to the barracks, while you opt to head to the Infirmary. Memories of your time with Marco haunt the recesses of your mind, overshadowed by the decomposing shell of a man you stumbled across today. The dark thoughts rekindle your nausea from before, powerful enough to flood your nostrils with a pungent odor.

You take a whiff.

Then another.

Your thoughts, powerful as they are, are not the culprit here.

There's smoke accompanying this odor, dancing around you, and you rapidly turn to find the source: a lanky brunette, lounging about the dark, grassy slopes in the fields behind the castle. Nonchalant. Not as if one missing friend had turned up dead today, and another absence might disturb people. Not at all concerned about his three terrified friends combing every inch of the castle grounds in their hunt for him.

"Where have you been," you demand, storming over to him. "Any idea what time it is? And what the hell are you smoking!?"

Holy Walls, you sound like Captain Hell-Lord. Well that needs to be reigned in posthaste. Gross.

"Outside, don't care and opium," Jean drawls from around the joint, not bothering to open his eyes.

"That's contraband!" you hiss."If anyone catches you, you'll be lucky to get out alive!"

Taking a grand inhale, he releases a hazy halo. Ensnaring the two of you, the growing ring of pale smoke expands its reaches outward. Cracking an eye open, Jean looks at you a long while before responding. "'Alive'? What are the chances of that happening, anyways?"

Sighing, you settle into the grass next to him. "I suppose you're right. Mind if I have a go?"

Shrugging, he passes the joint over to you.

A mistake on his part. Without wasting another second, you toss it beneath your boot and grind it
"What the fuck, (F/N)?" Jean squawks, sitting bolt upright. "I paid good money for that!"

"It slipped," you reply, returning his shrug like the epitome of casual while your gaze remains icy. "You know my right arm is weak."

Scowling, he gives your shoulder a light shove, before returning to lay in the grass. "You're lucky you're cute," he mutters. It takes a few minutes for him to fully appreciate the gravity of what he's just said, a side effect of the opium. But by then you're already giving him a cheeky grin, and it's far too late for take-backs.

"You're lucky too," you say, smirking. "You get a great view."

Flopping around, Jean turns his back to you and informs you that quite frankly, he's seen better.

"C'mon, don't be like that," you murmur, rubbing circles into his back. "We were all really worried about you. Sasha only ate a quarter of her usual potato salad serving. In her terms, that practically a declaration of unconditional love."

Releasing a long exhale, Jean moves to sit up, draping his elbows across his knees. "I just can't believe none of us noticed (F/N)," he whispers. "The guy was dead for hours and nobody even thought to ask. We just up and forgot he existed! What if that happens to us? What if we're left to rot on some rooftop somewhere?"

"It won't happen," you declare firmly, throwing your arms around his shoulders. Squeezing tight, you try to pass on the confidence you feel with that statement. "I won't let it. And we haven't forgotten Marco, we were just overwhelmed is all. We'll hold a memorial service for him tomorrow."

"How?" Jean inquires. "The body is being transferred to his family as we speak."

This calls to mind your time in the market putting together a gift basket for Marco, a memory plagued by visions of a dark-haired phantom who seems to know every last detail about the cadets he trains. That canister of tea he gifted Marco might still be in the barracks. You and Jean decide to collect a modest potpourri of Marco's belongings for burial tomorrow morning and invite the rest of your cohort to attend. You won't abide an existence where someone who sacrificed his life is denied a proper sendoff. After you discuss these plans, Jean drops you off at the Infirmary and heads out for the male barracks. After the torturous last few hours you have all had, you hope the stock of anti-nausea medication hasn't been completely depleted.

Good Stones of our Walls, how you wished you had eavesdropped before barging in the door to the exam room. In your defense, you hadn't expected it to be occupied at this time of night, least of all by Commander Erwin, Major Hange and Major Mike. Like clockwork, you click into an immediate salute before stuttering an apology. As rapidly as humanly possible, you slur out the explanation for this transgression against curfew.

"At ease, soldier," Erwin chuckles, arms held up in a placating gesture. "In fact, I was hoping to run into you."

Hange is beaming, which is starting to unnerve you. At your confusion, Erwin continues. "A little birdie told me that it was you who hatched the plan to hunt down the Armored Titan before
it could reach Wall Sina. In the chaos of battle, you demonstrated extraordinary initiative, Ms. (L/N)...

This doesn't sound like a reprimand? Unless those have changed since the Battle of Trost. Nevertheless, your nerves are still on high alert. Not to mention, that dreamy, silken voice of his is going to be the end of you.

“…commend your initiative. The Survey Corps could always use leaders like you.”

Walls, what was he saying? You were too busy gazing into those soothing baby-blues. Was it- was it true? Commander Erwin Smith, leader of the entire Survey Corps was showering you with praise? Insisting that the military would benefit from your talents? You must have not realized how long you had gone without positive feedback; immersed in the Training Corp's merciless drills and exercises, you'd almost forgotten what compassion felt like.

"Thank you, sir," you murmur, smoothing out your uniform in what you hope is a subtle manner."Honored to be of service."

"It was a horse-shaped little birdie, by the way," he says warmly, still smiling.

Even you can't hide the surprise that takes over your features. Surprise at how, firstly, someone as prestigious as Erwin even knows mundane trivia like Jean's nickname. More importantly, at how even in the midst of immense pain- Jean took it upon himself to do right by you. Your heart swells in your chest; Jean didn't even bother to mention it to you, wasn't trying to court anyone's favor. The only reason he informed Erwin is because he honestly believes you had deserve recognition.

The realization almost makes your eyes water.

"T-that's very kind of him," you say, averting your gaze to the tile. You hope Erwin doesn't catch the tremor in your voice. "But in all honesty, he's the reason we even made it to the supply depot. Jean helped rally the troops and fearlessly took point in Titan-ravaged territory. Everyone really listens to him during a crisis; he's... he's charismatic."

"Someone get a fucking mop, she's drooling," comes a sneering voice.

Choking out a gasp, you whirl around. You were so distracted by the presence of the Commander that you hadn't bothered to inspect the rest of the room, an oversight which has now come back to bite you.

In all of his shirtless glory, Levi sits perched atop an exam table, leaning forward with arms resting on powerful thighs. The uniform you normally see him in has not done him justice, cloaking his wiry, sculpted muscles. But you refuse to allow yourself to be caught staring, especially after this latest verbal thrashing. Petra flutters at his side, stitching up shallow cuts on his flank with far more petting than necessary, in your unbiased opinion.

Petra giggles, tilting her head and gazing at you from over his shoulder. "Aw Captain, I think her
crush is cute!"

Just as quickly as your heart soared, it now comes crashing down. You suddenly feel incredibly exposed. Tiny in the presence of these Survey Corps legends. Yes it's the same word Jean used, but it feels entirely different coming from Petra. Horribly wrong. Cute like a lost three-year-old stumbling about. Cute like a dandelion that evaporates with the slightest gust of wind. Cute like a useless newborn lamb.

Who has unknowingly walked into a den of wolves.

As if it's contagious, they're all laughing now, all except for Hange. Here was Commander Erwin, commending your skill, treating you like a professional, having a serious conversation with you about your future in the Corps. Yet in a mere two sentences, the Captain and his minion have annihilated you in front of the most senior members of the Survey Corps. You're not sure what your feelings are for Jean and you don't have the composure to sort through them now. Nevertheless, the only intention underlying your praise of Jean was the same as his: recognition of his merit. Nothing sordid. Nothing immature.

It had been pure.

Silver eyes glare at you unabashed, devouring the emotions playing across your features as he gives you a cold smile. Unnecessarily cruel. Nails biting into your fists, you want nothing more than to fire a response back about how Levi is absolutely swimming in Petra's drool, but you notice Erwin watching you carefully.

Levi has landed a significant blow, yes. Labeling you as childish, unfit for Erwin's praise. His comment, although ruthless and crude, will undoubtedly be overlooked, given his status. As a high-ranking Captain, one of the most feared and respected soldiers within all three branches of military and the most powerful asset humanity has, Levi enjoys certain privileges. Rudeness from you, a fresh Private, would certainly not be received with the same leniency. You understand this game. If you were to stoop to his level, it would only confirm Levi's accusations before Erwin.

You'll prioritize your status within the Corps over vengeance for now. Pursing your lips in a tight smile, as if you're enjoying this hideous joke of theirs, you reply,"I only wanted to give credit where credit is due, sir."

Scoffing, Levi is preparing for round two but Hange gets to you first. "(F/N), I've been meaning to find you but you were too busy causing a riot at the tribunal! I wanted to introduce you to my kids!"

You could kiss Hange right now. Midnight is an odd time to introduce anyone to children, but you appreciate her rescue attempt nonetheless. Peculiar though she might be, she has always been fair with you. As Hange leads you out of the Infirmary, Erwin bids you a final farewell.

"The Survey Corps is quite fortunate to count both of you and Mr. Kirschtein among its ranks, Ms. (L/N). Keep up the good work."

Spine a little straighter, chin held a little higher, you march out of the Infirmary.
Chirping crickets fall silent as your boots rustle through the grass. There's no one else here besides you two.

"Major Hange, this is a dark, secluded field."

"Yes!" she crows, smiling at you. Delighted you have figured this out.

"Er... I've never been a parent before, but is it recommended to keep your children out here? Alone?"

Laughing heartily, she dismisses you with a wave of her hand. "Don't be silly! What kind of mother would I be if I left them out here defenseless? They're in that pen over there!"

As your eyes adjust to the dark, you're able to make out large fences, covered with green drapes. "Y-you keep your children in an outdoor pen?" you ask, horrified.

She nods vigorously, undoing the padlock and guiding you inside. You can't believe she'd force these poor children, her own-

You shriek, throwing yourself back against cold metal fence. They stir.

"Look what you've done! Now all that time I've invested in putting them to sleep is wasted," Hange scolds, before dissolving into peals of laughter. "Just kidding, Titans don't actually sleep. Say hello to my babies, Sawney and Bean!"

"HANGE THESE ARE TITANS!"

"Yes, I'm aware. In fact, I just introduced you," she gripes, frustrated with how dense you're apparently being. She moves to pet Sawney's giant foot. "You're not usually this slow. Have you eaten well?"

Thick metal collars are clasped around their necks. Countless metal spokes radiate out from the collar, pinning the Titans to a large, overlying frame and multiple surrounding iron columns. Enormous blue eyes slowly creak open.

"Aw, look he likes you! Sawney is the one with blue eyes, by the way. Bean the one with brown," Hange clarifies, in case you are curious. "We salvaged them just before Captain Shorty went berserk on all the Titans on Trost."

"For what purpose?" you murmur. Sawney gazes back at you with a vacuous expression. "Besides, if people reacted this badly to Eren, they're positively going to freak when they see these."

"Funnily enough, people haven't reacted to them. Probably because they don't know, and I'm hoping to keep it that way, you understand?" she says, goggles glinting in the moonlight. "Aside from your cohort and a few higher ups, the public is completely unawares. But my children will serve the Survey Corps, well. Expeditions may take us beyond the Walls, but they force us to
return every time. Knowledge about these wonderful creatures, that is the key to breaking out of the Walls for good."

You let out a low whistle, admiring her foresight. She's truly a visionary, Major Hange. Who else has the gall to make research specimens out of the predators that have nearly hunted humanity to extinction?

"I barely convinced Erwin and Shorty to spare them! Oh, the adventures we'll have together! Experiments, dissections galore! Doesn't that sound fun, (F/N)?"

Yes, swimming in Titan guts sounds downright peachy, you agree. Sarcasm aside, her proposition piques your curiosity. You certainly are interested in unraveling the secrets of the Titans. Working with Hange would be fascinating. As she disappears out of the pen to retrieve something, she orders you to babysit her children in her absence. Promising to guard them with your life, you dare to approach them closer. Under the gentle light of the moon, they are almost perfectly still, aside from the hungry irises tracking your every move.

You sashay to the right.

You waltz to the left.

This is an excellent use of the expensive dance lessons that your mother paid for, you determine, as large eyes follow you. Supposedly, Titans are inactive at night, but you are still perturbed by how awake they are. Sharp enough to still closely follow their prey.

There is a sudden vice-like pressure wrapped around your nape and left arm. A force to your ankle, and you trip forward. In a heartbeat you find yourself mere centimeters away from Sawney's grasping fingers. Thrashing, you scream as the Titan gives a delighted gurgle, lunging forward. The metal frame manages to hold it at bay, but not without an enormous tremor.

"Don't get cocky," he rasps from behind you. Fingers drum along your nape, just barely flitting away before they land on your skin, letting you know that he can truly immobilize you any time he pleases. "It won't end well, Mitras runt."

In a testament to his cougar-like stealth, you never even heard him enter the pen. Steadying your breath, you wriggle in his grasp, trying to turn around and submit him to the full might of your glare. Against your struggling, he holds you firmly, presenting you to Sawney like tribute. "Back to pet names, are we?" you say. "Besides, Commander Erwin seems to think that I held my own against the Armored Titan just fine, Captain."

In a flash, he wrenches you into his chest, pulling you in close as his breath scorches the shell of your ear. "You got lucky and you know it. That riotous little shithead won't always be around to go through magical Titan puberty and save your ass. Make one wrong move, miss one detail out there and it'll all be over before you can screech to your Holy Walls."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you care," you singsong, winking at Sawney, who grins back down at you. See? He gets it, gets just how much of a douche the Captain is being.

Finally, Levi releases you, allowing you to meet him face-to-face. Quirking an eyebrow, he crosses his arms and gazes at you like you have just uttered the stupidest thing he has ever heard. Which, given some of the gems Connie has spewed over the last year, is saying something.
"And? What of it?" He asks, so blandly, so matter-of-factly that it shuts you right up, jaw going slack. Your teeth-grating smarminess was supposed to catch him off guard. Get him to scowl at you, get him flustered and hand you a satisfying victory, just like he had flustered you back in the Infirmary.

Instead, had he just... agreed? Admitted?

*Care* as in what way? As a fellow human? *Mentee*? *Friend*? ...*something else*?

"Unless you have a reason that I *shouldn't* value your life?"

Oh, right. *Of course.* He values all of your lives, or so he claims. He has to. It's part of the job description. Nothing special.

"Nope, I'm pretty damn valuable," you mutter. You really can't stand to look at him right now, so instead begin studying Sawney's toes. For a nude, rambunctious humanoid giant, they are surprisingly immaculate. While you are preoccupied envying Sawney's well-pedicured nails, Levi moves to stand next to you. He closes the distance in one fluid yet measured motion, exceptionally careful not to let his shoulder brush yours in the process. Engrossed in your inspection of Sawney's foot, you miss the Captain's quivering fingers. A calloused hand rises up, hovers beside your arm, before he thinks better of it.

"You have... promise," he murmurs, soft but resolute. "I'd hate to see it wasted."

When you complete your scrutiny of the Sawney's toe, you turn to find Levi watching you intently, surprisingly near. You're not sure what to make of this sudden turn of events; certainly there was no need for the Captain to trek all the way out here just to chide you into being careful? As always, reading him is like trying to crack the hieroglyphs you found scrawled in the base of the oldest parts of Wall Sina: impossible yet mesmerizing.

He's first to interrupt your shared gaze, scoffing as he marches back to the gate. "Oy, are you going to just stand here all night like a fucking halfwit? Get to the barracks. I'll lock up."

The good aren't long for this world.

For Sawney and Bean have been murdered in the dark of night.

You hear the knees of their demise over breakfast, from an impromptu, furious announcement by Hange. Her rage truly is terrifying to behold, a white-hot blazing fury that incinerates you all to ash.

"This moronic practical joke has cost humanity its two most valuable assets," she hisses. "Without
studying the Titans, absolutely nothing will change. Do you enjoy our miserable success rate? Was the cleanup after Trost fun? Because when you're all shoveling even more of your friends' bodies after the next expedition, you can thank these savages for condemning us to a future of the same, certain death!

Hands tucked behind her back, she takes slow, deliberate steps across the Mess Hall, threading her way in between benches to eye each of you in turn.

"The culprits responsible will be hunted down without mercy. The longer I have to wait for you, the more time my appetite for revenge has to grow and get stronger. I highly recommend you identify yourselves. For your sakes."

After barking out orders for immediate 3DMG inspection, Hange turns on her heel and storms outside. Plates full of rations are abandoned. Despite your hunger, you're forced to scrape off your breakfast into compost receptacles before depositing the plates and utensils into wash basins at the head of the Mess Hall. Rounding everyone up, Vice Captain Moblit allots five minutes for you all to fetch your assigned 3DMG equipment from the Shed before shuffling outside for inspection.

You would think someone of Hange's stature would delegate the menial task of inspecting equipment to a subordinate. Instead, she takes on the labor herself, refusing to trust anyone else with it. Fastidious, she scrutinizes every millimeter of everyone's equipment. Blades are scanned from tip to hilt. Fuel tanks are weighed, and the levels on the gauges recorded. Holsters are turned over twice each.

And that's how you notice the large ugly dent on Annie's left blade holster as she presents it to Hange. Narrowing your eyes, you peer around Armin to get a closer look. The damaged holster triggers a sense of familiarity in you, and you're not exactly sure why. Shooting you a pointed look, Armin nudges you back with his shoulder; whatever it is you sense, he has picked up on it too. You're not sure why he's silently asking you to back off for now, but you trust his judgement.

Annie passes Hange's exam without incident, and the line moves forward. When it's finally your turn, you try to catch Hange's gaze, but she refuses to spare any effort on pleasantries, immersing herself entirely in the hunt for her children's assailants.

You pass.

As you and the rest of your cohort hike to the training fields for practice, you manage to sidle up to Armin. Beckoning you after him, he disappears behind the far end of the Shed. Pale blue eyes dart around from beneath his bangs, ensuring you're alone.

"So," you begin. "Her equipment, I know you noti-"

"It's not hers," he cuts you off in hushed tones. "That's Marco's 3DMG gear. It got damaged right after the Colossal attacked. I'd recognize that dent anywhere."

Your bones feel like ice beneath your skin, locking you in place. Annie as never struck you as particularly vicious; cold and reserved, maybe, but aside from the disaster that was the Second Advanced Exercise, she had never gone out of her way to be cruel. In fact, she had never gone out of her way for anything. She felt like an entirely blank slate to you.

"But if that's true," you whisper,"then it would implicate Annie both in Marco's death and in killing Sawney and Bean, wouldn't it? What could possibly be her motive? She hardly seems like the 'practical joker' type."
Armin grimaces. "It's a sticky situation. Maybe their equipment got mixed up when we were refueling at the supply depot, and this certainly doesn't rule out other people from being the culprits. But it's definitely... odd. Keep it to yourself for now, alright? Until we gather more information, the fewer people know, the better."

"Know about what?" a silky voice interrupts.

Commander Erwin rounds the corner of the Shed, smiling warmly at you.

"Sasha's surprise birthday party," you blurt, forcing a smile onto your face to match his. You throw an arm around Armin's shoulders, like you're best friends. "Pretty please don't mention anything?"

"You have my word this information will remain classified," Erwin declares, touching his fist to his heart in a mock salute. "Now, it's my turn to ask something of you. Would you follow me to my office, Private (L/N)? I'd like a word with you. I have already seen to it that you are excused from all training activities today."

It's not like you actually have a choice, but you appreciate the renowned Survey Corps Commander acting like you do. A cute liberty for him to grant you. Armin capitalizes on this to request his dismissal and promptly darts away, leaving you alone with Erwin.

The trek back to his office is uneasy, to say the least. His honeyed words do little to set your mind at ease, although you must admit that he's a fantastic conversationalist. Versatile, shifting topics easily. Perhaps someone less familiar with Erwin than you would have been suckered in by that calming, easy charm of his, but you know better.

He's the Commander overseeing humanity's most impossible challenge. Nothing that Erwin does is without purpose.

Ever the gentleman, he holds the door to his office open, welcoming you in with a sweep of his arm. You pad your way across the fine wool carpet as if walking on eggshells. A broad, exquisitely crafted sandalwood desk greets you, with twin chairs before it to match. Your eyes follow the delicate swirls in the wood, each painstakingly etched by hand. The walls and bookcases are covered in certificates, laurels, gifts from admirers. Full, and yet completely impersonal. Nothing like Captain Levi's and yet everything like Captain Levi's.

"You have got to be fucking joking."

It even comes equipped with a Captain Levi, who eyes you warily from over the back of a chair.

Shutting the door behind him, Commander Erwin ignores him. He offers you a seat, before rounding the corner of his desk.

"Oy, Caterpillar-Brows, what the fuck did I do to deserve this?"

While Levi snarls his protests, you take the opportunity to edge into the only available seat, which unfortunately happens to be next to him. Clearing his throat to silence the wayward Captain, Erwin begins.

"Ms. (L/N), what I am about to reveal to you cannot leave this room."
That sweet, velvety voice, those twinkling blue eyes are entirely gone. In their place is a somber frown.

"We are involving a Private only because the situation is *dire*. As Major Hange has just informed you, two of our prized assets were destroyed last night by as of yet unknown culprits. That fact, combined with the convenient timing of the Colossal and Armored Titans' invasion of Trost, *exactly* while the Survey Corps was on an expedition, is extremely suspect. We have ample reason to believe that this was an inside job; only the Garrison and Military Police know the Survey Corp's schedule. Given how many of them were slaughtered, the Garrison is unlikely to be behind this. But based off of their shared history, and their performance at Eren's trial, it is possible that the Military Police and Church of the Walls are colluding to sabotage us. To what *specific* end, we are not yet certain."

Colluding? To sabotage humanity? His words make sense, *in technical terms*, but you can't possibly bring yourself to believe this. Surely even the Military Police wouldn't content itself with endangering so many human lives?

"T-that's a pretty serious accusation, sir," you say slowly. "With all due respect, if you believe the Church of the Walls may be even partially responsible, why would you tell me? Surely you're aware that my family follows the Church's tradition."

"As I mentioned, the situation is dire. We need to gather intelligence as quickly as possible, without alerting either party to our suspicions. Ordinarily, we would simply send Levi to Wall Sina on a reconnaissance mission, putting him up in military accommodations. But any such operation is going to involve a paper trail, which would compromise everything."

"Absolutely f*cking not."

You ignore Levi's tantrum to focus on Erwin. "Sir, while that's understandable, I'm not exactly sure how I can help?"

"Your connection to Mitras may be critical to this mission," Erwin informs you. "Both the Military Police headquarters and Church of the Walls are located there. *You*, a Mitras native, going on a trip to visit your family would arouse less suspicion than one of the most recognizable members of the Survey Corps being sent on official business."

"I'm short, not f*cking invisible. Keep ignoring me and I'll shave off those damn fuzzy eyesores."

"Certainly, I'm happy to, but I hardly have the training for a mission of such caliber," you murmur. 

"That's the first halfway intelligent thing I've heard this whole f*cking time."
"You won't be going alone," Erwin reassures you. "You see, a visit to your family accompanied by your great uncle from Wall Rose would merely be the cover."

"Tch, there's no fucking way I'd be related to a priss."

You've heard of how rigorous the border patrol at the Wall Sina crossing is; undercover and without his military credentials, there is no way Levi will be granted access to Mitras.

"So, you want me to sneak Levi in, undercover as my great uncle, to Mitras, and have our base of operations be my family home," you say, mulling over the daring proposition. "Alright, Alright, I accept. But we'll need forged documents. And still, this doesn't solve the training problem. I've never been trained in--"

"Don't fret about the details," Erwin says, the epitome of confidence. "All you need to focus on is getting him in undetected. I'll make the necessary arrangements for everything else. Levi will explain your orders to you in detail once you arrive safely."

"You're going to entrust a fresh, inexperienced Private with something this delicate? Much less this one?" Levi hisses, casting a critical eye at you. "Come the fuck on, Eyebrows, this is a disaster waiting to happen."

Blue eyes narrow slightly, dangerously.

"The only alternative is our underground contacts, which carries an unacceptable level of risk," Erwin answers. His tone, as cold and immovable as the courthouse marble, leaves no room for discussion. "Even you, Levi, haven't kept up with them enough to know who may be working for the Military Police as informants. This is our best option."

"Our best option is sending me undercover on my own, sans Mitras princess here," Levi retorts. "Give me two days, it'll be done. Quick, clean and precise as fuck."

"Her family name will buy you access to Mitras quickly, cleanly and precisely," Erwin replies in an icy calm. "Either you go with her, or I'll find someone else. Obviously, as the head of the Special Operations Squad, you are the most qualified for such an espionage mission and therefore my preferred candidate. However, I absolutely will not compromise either the safety of my best soldier or the integrity of this mission by sending you in alone. One mistake, Levi, and we'll tip our hand to the MP."

Crossing his arms, Levi settles his weight against the back of the chair. Works his jaw. Takes a few moments to consider.

"Oy, Mitras brat," he calls to you, gaze never leaving Erwin's. "Give me a moment with Bush-Brows, here."

Nodding, you rise out of your chair.

They're quiet as you walk out of the room, quiet long after you shut the door to his office. Only when your footsteps trail down the corridor does Levi begin.
Levi is given a day to prepare; three days for the mission after that. Besides your departure time and strict orders to keep this information confidential, no details are divulged to you.

For his part, Levi plays the part of a cantankerous old man **convincingly** well. Hange has decked him out in a rickety wooden cane and knapsack, with a cast fastened over his left leg to milk as much sympathy as possible. Beyond the scruff and stubble he's grown that Mike helped dye gray, or the rigid jerking that he has adopted into his joints, Levi just **exudes** a sense of being severely discontent with absolutely everything.

More so than usual.

It doesn't help that it takes you a solid forty minutes just to get to Wall Sina; you have been patiently waiting in the line for border patrol for three times longer than the journey. The checkpoint is bustling with commotion. Scanning the lines, you discover a mix of people from all walks of life. Merchants with wares to sell. Travelers on holiday. Citizens, making an exasperating trek to the country's capital for official business. Refugees with little in the way of material possessions beyond the clothes on their back.

When the customs agent finally calls you forward, it's well into the afternoon. Unsurprisingly, he's a Military Police officer; they wouldn't trust any other branch with determining who is allowed to board the barge leading into the heart of your country. Scanning your pair of yellowed documents, he frowns. Your heart skips a beat as his eyes skim the words more slowly, wondering if the soldier has encountered the line listing Levi as your great uncle.

"(L/N)? That's one of the noble Mitrassian families, isn't it?" he asks.

Confirming your surname, you draw on every ounce of your heritage for the next few moments. Laughing softly, you are **delighted** that he has heard of your family. Modest, low-ranking nobles. A true honor to be recognized by such outstanding members of society as the Military Police!

"I wasn't aware that you had kin outside Wall Sina," he says coldly.

**Great uncle** is a distant relation, you inform him. But in light of the tragedy and heartbreak in Trost, your family has insisted that great uncle come to live with you in Mitras. Catching the ring on his fourth finger, you say,"Surely a loyal, family-oriented man such as yourself could understand? We just want to spend time together before it's too late. His knapsack has already been inspected, so if we could just get our permits-"

"Your family could always come down to visit him," he points out. "I don't why access to Mitras is necessary for your great uncle."

His words practically set your thoughts ablaze, lighting you with indignation. Even with all the needless death and devastation in the wake of Trost's invasion, somehow this man has it in him to be ruthlessly inhumane. Rather than protecting human life, his only priority is how a frail, old refugee might offend the delicate senses of Mitras' elite and pampered.

To your horror, Levi steps in, croaking out that he doesn't want to abandon his lands in Wall Rose, Titans be damned! The customs agent requests that he kindly **lower his voice**. Tension crackles in the air like electricity. You struggle to regain control of the quickly spiraling situation. Draping an arm about his shoulders, you rush to pacify your **great uncle**, reminding of how desperately the rest of your family wants to see him, reminding him of how dangerous it is to try and survive outside of Mitras.

"You telling me I just survived a herd of man-eating giants, and you're too scared to let in a sickly
old man?" Great Uncle Levi demands, voice rising. "Are all the people of Mitras cowards, shitting their pants like you? Cause you ain't doing much to sell the city, son. I'd sooner die free than live a slave to these pompous, shit-for-brain assholes."

For good measure, he raps his cane against the shins of a now very irritated customs agent. The same agent you had just spent the last quarter hour trying to butter up.

This shrimp is going to be the death of you.

Does he want this mission to fail? you think, trying to convey your thoughts through a fierce glare.

Just as the agent is about shove your papers back at you with a few choice insults, the travelers in line behind break out into woops, applauding your great uncle's unwavering pride and courage. With the chorus growing louder, ignited by Levi's passion, the MP quickly stamps your papers and mutters wishes for a safe journey.

The cunning little demon; he knew this would happen, artfully manipulating the situation. The Infirmary incident is still too fresh in your mind for you to vocally praise his clever plot, however. Clambering the ramp up to the barge, you plop yourself down on the first bench you find, sagging into it as you shut your eyes.

A weight settles next to you. "You should eat something."

"No thank you, sir," you say crisply, keeping your eyes shut. Erwin entrusted him with the funds, and you were too rushed to bring your own. Even though it would technically be a military expenditure, it still feels like charity from Levi. Unacceptable, considering this is the same man who, just a few nights ago, made you look like a hormone-addled, starstruck school-girl with an obsessive crush in front of the Commander of the Survey Corps.

"Eat," he orders. "Otherwise you'll pass out and be even more useless than you already are."

Your stomach growls and you desperately try to cover it with a cough, furious that your belly has betrayed you. Making yourself comfortable on the wooden bench, you shut your eyes once more. When your intention to ignore him become abundantly clear, he finally disappears from your side. Playing dead apparently really does work. You don't realize you have actually dozed off until a large rumble jolts you awake. Thundering forward, the barge begins its trek upriver. Water slaps at the wood below, rocking you much to the delight of the children on deck. Panicked, your first thought is to find Levi, more for the integrity of the mission than anything else. What if you get separated? Why on earth would he just walk off like that?

As you scan the crowd, something sharp pokes into your side and you move to grab it by instinct. "What is this?" you mutter, eyeing the parcel. It feels hefty in your hand, swaddled in beige wax paper and tied with thin rope.

"The Mitras Priss special, with extra cheese," your great uncle answers, reclaiming his seat next to you. How long were you out that he had enough time to make a trip to the food stalls set up alongside the river, and then slip back on the barge?

Walls damn it, he knows your crippling weakness for delicious dairy. You make it a priority to determine where he's collecting all these personal details from; it irks you, especially given how
little *anyone* knows about him.

"Captain, I'm lactose intolerant," you lie. Even as your mouth waters, you spare the sandwich only a single unimpressed glance. As if your appetite isn't raging.

"You're not," comes the immediate reply. "Erwin and I scanned your medical records before departure. The only condition of note was high-grade insufferableness."

You swear he's smirking through that scruff of his, reveling that he has caught you in a clumsy fib. Throwing an elbow over the side of the barge, he looses himself in the embrace of a soft afternoon breeze. You turn to see what he's looking at, allowing yourself to admire the rolling emerald hills of Mitras. You can't believe you had almost forgotten what home looked like, this fragile Eden kept far away from the clutches of Titans. If the Captain shares your fondness for the natural beauty here, he gives no indication. If anything, your attention is stolen by the weary shadows carved beneath his eyes, the grim line of his mouth.

"Would you like some?" you ask, presenting him with half of the Mitras Priss special. With extra cheese.

"Mm?" Silver eyes flick to you, before darting to the offering. "No, save your strength. Besides, you probably fucking spit in it when I wasn't looking."

He really *does* know you well!

"What will *you* eat then?" you persist. The sandwich remains midway between the two of you, poised on the pedestal of your hand.

He fixes you with a stare sharp enough to flay skin.

"You."

Only when you shakily begin untangling the parcel, does he remove his paralyzing gaze. Peeling away the wax paper, you take extra care to spread it on your lap like a placemat. If your expectations were low, then you are pleasantly surprised. The sandwich absolutely melts in your mouth, teasing you with the savory taste, and you have to dive back in for another bite before you've even finished the first.

A colorful glob plunks down onto your lap. You almost launch a meltdown, before remembering you took the time to protect your clothes with the wax paper.

Your chin is snatched to the left in mid-chew, cold fingers digging into your stuffed cheeks.

"How the hell do you even function on a day-to-day basis? Fucking Titans have more sense," Levi grumbles, producing a handkerchief. He scrapes off the crumbs decorating your chin with all the tenderness of someone trying to pry your skin from the bone. "Your parents haven't seen you for fucking months and you want to pop in looking like shitty slob?"

You thought Levi's role for this mission was posing as great uncle, not your anal-retentive nanny, but evidently you stand corrected. So strange, the way Levi expects you to treat seeing your parents, as if they were decorated military superiors rather than dear family you have known all your life.
"I would think they would just be happy to see me," you reply simply.

He halts his labor as narrowed silver eyes lock onto yours. You watch him turn this concept over in his head, breaking it apart to see how it works. Levi decides you look presentable enough, at the moment. For the rest of the trip, he returns to his post at the barge's railing, silently watching polished world of Mitras flow by him.

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The sky is deep indigo, eating away the last orange rays of the sun, by the time the taxi carriage rolls up to your family home. It's a modest condo, tucked right above your mother's workshop. You can barely keep your eyes open as you drag your bones through the dark workshop, up the rickety steps in the back to your home.

The door opens before you can knock.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" your mother demands, before launching into a suffocating hug. Immediately, she goes rigid, and you know she's finally spotted your great uncle.

"(F/N), you never told me we were having company," your mother hisses. "Who might this be?"

While Levi's cover for infiltrating Mitras was that of your great uncle, the same story would clearly not convince your family. However, for both their own safety and the success of the mission, they could not be allowed to learn Levi's true identity or purpose. Therefore, Levi now transforms into a hapless, elderly citizen you helped out at the checkpoint.

"Farlan Magnolia," Levi says gruffly, extending a hand forward as he effortlessly adopts a Northern district accent. "Used 'tuh work as a barge director fuh years, but they been holdin' out on my pension. Decided to come down to Mitras in person to finally sort this mess out. If it wasn't for yuh daughter, those thugs woulda never let me pass."

"Mom, I was thinking Mr. Magnolia could stay with us for the night?" you say with a sheepish grin. "With how long it's taken us to get here, it'll be a little tough to hunt around for lodging now."

Your mom is trying to skewer you with a glare for slapping a stranger down on her doorstep at night, unannounced. You hope your grin will soften her up.

"Always happy to welcome a guest," your mother says sharply. "(F/N), come help me prepare your old room."

Your mother verbally excoriates you in private over the presence of this Walls-forsaken stranger ("Some children bring their parents souvenirs, and you bring me a gross old man? He could be a criminal!"). As you both monitor him from around a corner, she orders you to discreetly transfer any valuables in the house to her room.

Nevertheless, he manages to do the impossible: change your mother's mind. Over dinner, your mother falls in love with Farlan Magnolia. He returns her feelings.

The splendid table setting your mother has prepared is not lost on Levi; he applauds the pains she has taken, delighting in the blinding gleam of the meticulously scrubbed implements. To hear that her love for even the most minuscule details is shared practically brings tears to your mother's eyes.

"My daughter can't even tell apart the fish fork from the salad fork!" she declares. "Can you believe?"
You still don't understand why it wouldn't be more economical to just use the same fork for a single meal, but the last time you asked that your mother had practically disowned you. Besides, it's sweet to see her so excited to find a fellow obsessive freak.

"Walls help you," Levi answers, shaking his head. "May as well be using soup spoon for caviar."

This is apparently some form of humor where Levi comes from? Because your mother laughs gleefully, leaving you to glance in confusion between them. Even your father seems to like him, awakening from the haze he is normally in.

When Levi tries to collect and wash the finished dishes, your mother insists he wait in the salon. Shooing him outside the kitchen, she pushes him onto the couch, fetches an ottoman for his weary ankles. Orders you to go iron silk bedsheets -the nice ones, not the old!- for her favorite houseguest.

Once you finish, you summon his majesty to his quarters, before heading back down to help your mother clean up. You struggle to drown out her incessant praise of him. So what if he has a special fork for every damn holiday? How this intolerable jerk has managed to enchant your mother so easily is beyond you, but you guess there's no accounting for taste. You know you should be happy the mission has started off so well, but damn it all if you aren't a little jealous.

Clambering back up the stairs, you fetch him the nice cotton towels, with fresh olive-based soap for his use. Only the best.

You give two quick raps on your door before slipping in.

In a heartbeat, you're wrenched into the darkness and the door slams behind you. When your eyes adjust to the single candle he has lit, you see the window shutters have been drawn tight. Great Uncle has shed his costume, allowing the Captain to return. The piles of stuffed animals that once decorated your bedspread have been pushed to the side; in their place is a complex array of handguns, bullets, knives and paperwork. To Levi's credit, he had put wax paper beneath his weapons display to protect your quilt. You appreciate the thought

"Does everyone in Mitras besides your mother completely lack sense, or is it just you?" He spits out, twisting the lock. "Wait after you knock. What if your parents were walking by while these were out??"

"Hate to be that person, but technically, you are also in Mitras," you say. "Besides, I thought this was strictly a reconnaissance mission, so why are you carrying enough weapons for a whole brigade? And how'd you even get all this past customs?"

"One, there are many ways of collecting information," he replies simply. "Two, notice how I'm no longer wearing a cast."

He had a miniature supply depot stuffed in his cast? No wonder he was so unbearable. The room lapses back into silence as he dutifully scrubs the guns.

"Commander Smith said you'd give me my instructions upon arrival. How shall I help, sir?"

"Count and wipe the bullets. Twice."

Seasoned by years of experience on the front lines, Levi leaves nothing to chance. You've always admired the tactical side of him, though most of the other sides of him you could do without. Kneeling against the bed, you quietly get to work. The bullets are cool against your palms as you
count them. You imagine them plowing into the heart of a fellow human, ending their life in an instant. Suddenly, you really wish you were still downstairs, still listening to the new president of Farlan Magnolia's fanclub squealing.

"Never shot a gun before?" he asks, eyes still trained on the guns.

Your mind flashes back to a supply depot overrun with Titans. "Once, and it didn't really end well."

With a flick of his wrist, Levi beckons you over. "We've got time. I'll teach you. It'll be easier to carry this out if I know you have basic fucking survival skills."

With that, the candle that served as your only source of light is eliminated. Plunged into endless darkness, your eyes dart around frantically.

"...so is blinding yourself the first step, or...?"

"Quiet," he orders. The warm puff of air caressing your ear takes you by surprise, making you jump. Only a heartbeat ago, he had been at least a few meters from you. "You're too dependent on sight."

Unlike your Captain, who is apparently some breed of magical mole-person and doesn't need sight.

"Shut your eyes. You're going to keep trying to see if they're open."

Sighing in resignation, you oblige. With your eyes temporarily out of commission, your other senses kick into overdrive. You can hear your parents bustling about below, the Captain's soft breath from behind you.

Out of the dark come your silent instructions. His toe nudges your heels shoulder-width apart, his hand pulls your dominant leg ever so slightly back. He taps at your knees to get you to flex them, pushes gingerly at the small of your back till you lean forward. Extends your arms out as far as they will go, tips your chin up so your head is level.

"Any type of gun can be fired effectively from this position. Good absorption of recoil," he murmurs. "Memorize this stance, the placement of your muscles. It'll get you out of a tough spot, if you need it."

You recall the rifle jutting back at you after you haphazardly shot it in the supply depot, shooting pain up your arms. This demonstration of Levi's is surprisingly helpful with minimal sass quotient.

Just as you're about to thank him, you sense a schism in air. Something is off.

"Goodbye, (F/N)."

A hollow farewell. So close.

Unnervingly close.

The wind from his sudden lunge forward kisses your shoulder blades as you dart to the side, slapping the window shutters open. His hands close in on empty space.

Leaving your back to him was dangerous. Spinning on your heel, your attention is immediately seized by his hand. Something catches the moonlight.

A syringe, you realize mouth gaping.
Another twitch of his fingers and it twirls in an arc of silver, liquid sloshing. You wonder how those deft fingers possibly missed your neck, and what they'll do when they finally catch it.

"You want to know Erwin's orders?" Levi asks, voice low and menacing. Moonlight silhouettes him as he stalks forward, obscuring his gaze. "Then hold still."

Erwin, that cunning fox. He was never planning on allowing you to join the actual mission, was he? You should have known when you went this long without any details about what you would be doing, but you assumed Levi was only being cautious. Unfortunately, you don't have the time to grant Erwin's cunning the respect it deserves. Muscles kicking into action, you bolt towards the door.

You can still feel the cool metal of the doorknob brushing your fingertips when he jerks you by the upper arm, dragging you back into the room.

Levi draws you into his embrace, pulling you inexorably forward, and you know if he makes it you won't be able to escape the needle that lies waiting. Knees buckling, you crumple to the floor, toppling Levi down with you as he grunts in surprise.

The fall has loosened his grip on your upper arm by a hair; at best, it's a marginal chance, but you'll seize it.

"My family welcomes you into our home and the Survey Corps thanks us with poison?" You hiss, scrabbling to pry off the fingers cinching your bicep.

He releases his hold on your arm only to snatch your wrists, pinning them above you.

"It's for your own safety, you melodramatic brat," he snorts. "Just a sedative."

"How are drugs safe?" You demand, snarling as you resort to kicking out at him.

Clambering over you, he wrestles you to the floor, slamming his legs over your flailing limbs.

"A precaution to ensure you won't follow and interfere," he grunts. "If you're spotted, you'd endanger both yourself and your family. A necessary precaution- quit squirming- given your track record- oy I said settle!"

Deciding that you're unlikely to simmer down anytime soon, he transfers your struggling wrists to the guardianship of his left hand. With his right now freed, Levi reaches for something out of your view, before leaning forward and forcing your wrists together above you. The cloth scrapes against your skin as he serpentines it between your hands. Belatedly, you realize he's affixed you to the foot of the bed; the bandages that once wrapped his cast now hold you prisoner.

"Look, I give you my word I won't follow you on your little quest! l--mmph!"

Looming over you, Levi completes his masterpiece by gagging you with the face towel. The freshly-washed one your mother brought for him. The one she insisted you iron to ease the wrinkles out of, because guests and propriety. Heaving a sigh, he retrieves the syringe that had long since clattered to the floor. Examining the cap, he ensures the tip has remained covered before returning his attention to you.

The scene that awaits gives you both pause. Chest heaving, you watch him with a cautious gaze. With your pesky arms immobilized, Levi allows himself to rest on his haunches, his
knees guarding either side of your hips. He holds you down with his weight, and you can see the cogs of his mind click into place as he scrutinizes this newfound closeness.

He clicks his tongue at you, patronizing.

"Tch, the mess you've made of yourself, *writhing* on the floor like that," he scolds, skimming the syringe across length of your collarbone. Cool metal ascends your neck. Dances along the outline of your mouth, Teases your lips. On instinct, you freeze in the presence of the needle, before remembering that it's capped. Roving silver eyes drink you in, savoring the sight of you sip by sip, without even the paltriest attempt to mask it.

"By now, surely you're aware of the hygiene standards for our personnel, aren't you, Private?"

You're familiar with the exacting cleanliness he enforces, yes. A fan of it, even. Instead of revealing any of this, you narrow your eyes and remain silent. He evidently finds your trivial rebellion upsetting. The syringe is prodded into the side of your jaw, drilled further and further into the bone until you're forced to nod an answer.

"Then the only conclusion I can come to is that you *knowingly* neglected your responsibilities," he says like he's surprised. Shocked at the outrageous scandal you've embroiled yourself in. "Seems I have no choice but to teach you *diligence*.

That unpleasant smile of his is back to play, sending sparks of dread jolting through you. He rips the gag out of your mouth. Casts it aside.

Metal floods your taste buds.

The syringe has broken the seal of your lips, plunged halfway into your mouth as you squeak in surprise.

"You'll start by cleaning *this*."

The syringe is hoisted partially out of your mouth, before being dunked in again for emphasis. Perhaps the dinner was tampered with, or you've already been injected with the sedative and are now dreaming. Whatever the reason, you dutifully obey, clamping your lips down. Wrap your tongue around the syringe. Lather it with saliva. Scrub off the dust.

He watches you with rapt attention. Pupils drown those ice-like irises in liquid ebony, dark and unending. His depravity is catching. Possessed by a sudden need to wreak havoc, you flick out your tongue to catch his finger, poised at the side of the syringe.

Just to screw with his head, obviously.

"Good girl," he breathes. His knees are digging painfully into your hips, but the warmth of his praise soothes away any discomfort, numbs you. He forces the syringe further back into your mouth, deliberately lowering his fingers ever closer to your lips. Metal nudges the back of your throat, and you're nearly choking. It's not the syringe he wants you to lick clean, and you oblige him the unspoken request. You strain to stretch your tongue up before it meets warm flesh. Over and over, you lap at as many of his digits you are able, meticulously tracing over the joints.

"A *solid* work ethic when given the proper *direction*," he murmurs. "And yet..."

With polished dexterity, Levi uses his free hand to pop the buttons of your blouse. Tensing, you halt your ministrations, eyeing him carefully. The tone of this encounter is rapidly transmuting into something beyond your control. Something you can't simply laugh off.
"Hard work alone is insufficient," he says like he's reading you tomorrow's weather forecast from the almanac. Lazy eyes watch from above you as he circles a finger around your bare breast. Each ring that he draws into your flesh leaves a delectable tingling in its wake. You're horrified that he has so easily persuaded your body to turn on you.

"You must be alert, perceptive, relentless."

The pretty words bounce off of your ears and are lost in the haze of the dark room. Your sole focus is the warmth in your cheeks as your breath quickens. Jerking at your wrists, you move to cover yourself but the makeshift manacles trapping you to the bed hold strong. Only a few meters away are your old schoolbooks, your childhood playthings. Your old room is a bizarre stage for this type of meeting with your Captain, one that you're pretty sure breaks at least one rule.

"Attentive to every last detail," he murmurs, leaning forward.

You can't believe your eyes.

Chapped lips close around the mound of your breast. He suckles you, warm tongue spiraling around your areola, flickering out to meet your nipple. Nipping when he doesn't think you're being responsive enough. His other hand releases the syringe on the ground by your shoulder in favor of kneading your other breast.

Pleasant heat pools low in your abdomen, radiating out to lick at every part of you. With every savage squeeze of soft flesh, every wet caress, your mind is devolving further into a blissful fog.

"But somehow," he says, muffled as he worships your chest. "I'm not convinced you appreciate the fucking nuances of vigilance."

The hand kneading your breast explores new territory, slowly forging lower. Euphoria is bubbling through your veins in place of blood, poisoning your mind with all the many directions this can go. He swirls his hand around your stomach, fiddles with your navel. Stirs an unseen pot, before loosening the zipper that seals your slacks. The waistline has barely been unraveled before he jerks them down to your knees.

"For instance," he says, still lapping at your breast. "You deviate very easily under fucking distraction."

You cry out, as your panties are jerked sharply upward, fabric carving into your slit. Gasping in pain, you wriggle under his grip, head ramming into the bedpost behind you as you try to create distance. Indifferent, Levi holds them there as the cloth burns into your most delicate skin.

He moves up to hiss in your ear, "Case in point, you make the dumbest fucking decisions whenever Kirschtein rolls around."

With that, your panties are torn away, leaving smarting flesh in their wake. You move to slam your thighs shut but he's quicker, jimmying a knee between them. He cants his head back to glance down at what you tried to hide from him, swollen and glistening. Rolling his neck, Levi releases a guttural sound, rumbling from deep within the hollow of his chest.

With a wicked smile, he begins shifting his knee back and forth, creating an irresistible friction. Panting, you glare up at him. In response, he only rubs his knee harder against you. Your thighs are pleading to part further, to allow him entrance but you stubbornly refuse. Swallowing down a moan, you dig your incisor into your lip so hard that it bleeds.
"See how easy it is? All I have to do is mention his name and you resort to self-mutilation," he purrs, lapping at the crimson bead trickling down.

"Y-you seem p-pretty obsessed with J-jean Kirschtein, Captain," you snarl out between ragged breaths. "S-something you'd like-e to share?"

"Only looking out for this naive little subordinate," he says, sounding not very altruistic at all. "I've seen the way he looks at you, even if you haven't."

With that, you can't help the tiny whimper that escapes. Two fingers have found their way down to your slick folds. His movements deliberately avoid any sensitive areas, lingering and purposeless, only priming your body more. Squirming in discomfort, you can feel yourself helplessly growing damp. While he maneuvers you freely, all you can do is guess his next move.

Abruptly, Levi laughs, a dark, menacing sound that has you shuddering. His next words are a sinister hiss in your ear, "Tell me, what would Kirschtein say if he knew you were being touched like this? Has he ever dared? I'll bet he's fucking fantasized about seeing you like this...rode hard and put away wet."

Deciding coyness has overstayed its welcome, Levi begins moving in earnest, dragging his tongue down a trail from your collar bone to your stomach. A prickling pleasure blooms, coursing down your spine. Heart pounding, you watch ebony locks disappear further down.

Whatthefuckishe-

Something torrid and wet traces lazy circles around your entrance and you find your back arcing as you curse him. Around and around and around he cycles, in a maddening circuit that never quite gets at the center but has you mewling. If he's feeling particularly nasty, he'll let his tongue dart across for the briefest second but meticulously avoids the exact push your body is crying out for. Gouging your nails into the bedpost your trapped against, you wriggle in every direction possible to escape. The powerful heat in your core grows unbearable, frantic, and robbed of breath you gnash your teeth to staunch the-

"Some humility would do you good," he growls against your thighs, clawing your ass to hold you still. "Would open those fucking eyes a bit. Now yield."

"T-tired al-ready?" you crow, cheeks flushed. "I c-could do-o this al-l night-oh-"

Painstakingly, his tongue creeps along the entire length of your slit, ending in a taunting flick to your clit.

This really isn't fair.

"T-that so?" he drawls, out of breath. "Doesn't seem like it, with all those pathetic sounds you've been making."

He gives another slow, agonizing lick, dancing around your clit and you're fighting every instinct to buck up against him. "But since you're so damn proud, maybe I'll just leave you here for your parents to find. Let them see what mischief you get up to."

"Y-you wouldn't dare!"

"Why not? I could use the laugh." he answers, dusting his pants as he rises to his feet. "Nighty night."
You're torn between the white-hot need thrumming in your body and the frenzied horror at having your parents discover you in such a state. "Captain please!" you cry out indignant, desperate.

He cocks his head to the side. "Afraid I don't understand."

Grinding your teeth, you barely manage the next words. "P-please Captain Levi, finish what you started."

The quirk of his eyebrow tells you the snark has not been well received. "Last I checked, Captains don't take orders from insolent fucking Privates."

Screwing your eyes shut, you take a deep breath. You can't possibly bear to look at him when you utter your next words. You know you'll regret them later. "P-please Captain Levi, sir, have mercy."

Breaking out into a dark chuckle, he leisurely lowers himself to his knees. Takes his time to crawl over to you, silver eyes piercing you all the while. Tearing your thighs apart, you can feel him smirk against your skin.

"Smart fucking choice."

Any restraint he held before is long gone this time. His tongue plunges in, savage and almost painful. Short, powerful thrusts fill you with a thrilling heat. Your breaths tumble out in a chain of meek gasps; he encourages you with soft circles on your hips. It curls your spine, sends your thighs trembling but he pinches his nails into your thighs, forcing you still. He ignites every millimeter of your skin, electrifies every nerve. His pulses are rapidly gaining speed, spasmodic, as he drives you relentlessly to the brink. You're writhing when the floodgates finally burst open, racking you as sharp, pleasant currents explode all over, but then there's a prick in your neck and you drown in calm, dark waters.

Chapter End Notes

Oof, first attempt at smut in a long, long time, so I hope it was enjoyable @_@ These two just can't help their power struggles, can they? That scene is dedicated to anexartita, for motivating me to write some brutal smexytimes with our fav Captain, even though smut is possibly one of the hardest things for me to write.

A few points (MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS FOR THE FEMALE TITAN ARC IN THE MANGA):

- Regarding commanding officer titles: Reader refers to those she doesn't know by their last name ("Commander Dok of the Military Police"), but since Reader has known Erwin for a year, she's more comfortable using his first name in her narration ("Commander Erwin").

- Regarding the squad leader titles: For Mike and Hange, I noticed on the Wikipedia that both their titles are technically listed as "Squad Leader", even though Hange is frequently referred to as a "Major", which would be a higher rank. Since "Squad Leader Mike" just sounds dorky, I used "Major" as the title for both, but I portray Hange as being Erwin's right hand.
- Regarding Levi's title: So the direct English translation of Heichou would be "Lance Corporal", even though that's a lower rank than Captain, which is how he's referred to in the anime. I have switched off between them (just because Lance Corporal sounds sexy) but will stick to Captain from now on. It's also worth noting that given his unique origins- Levi has been described several times in the official material to wield significant authority while standing outside the traditional hierarchy of the Survey Corps, hence the differing title from Hange and Mike.

- Regarding the Walls, since it's pretty much secret knowledge that the Walls are built of hardened Titan, I headcannon the Church of the Walls members as assuming they are made of stone
Accidentally leaked a partially finished version of this chapter, like a boss. LOOK AWAY. NOBODY SAW ANYTHING. EVEN IF YOU DID.

Thank you everyone so much for all the love and kind support :) I can't believe how quickly we're progressing through this, and I hope the ride proves to be an enjoyable one.

I think you'll find this chapter has a slightly... different pace. Dedicated to No_Regrets and Aars, for inspiring me and kindly sharing their detailed intakes about the world of AoT, the writing process and most importantly, our favorite, irresistible imp.
Air roars past, nearly drowning out Kenneth's hooves. Their pounding rises up, beating against my muscles like war drums. With the Survey Corps kilometers behind us, it's me and him, him and me, the final living beings inhabiting this forsaken place.

He's a solid horse, steadfast. Other mounts spook this close to Titans, but Kenneth takes it in stride, racing against wind itself. The world dissolves into a chaotic mess of colors around us. His dark neck's coated with sweat when I give Kenneth one last pat before launching into the air.

The fight sings in my fucking blood, locking my aim, clicking my muscles into place, building the force up without me even needing to think it through. Cutting wind. Screaming blades. Rains of blood.

Three targets, 15-meter class, 50 meters away. Or at least, that's what they'll write on their fucking obituaries.

They catch up just as I'm landing. About damn time. We'll need as many of us as possible to finish this, if we want anything to be left of the Garrison. Damn good-for-nothing posers.

"Captain that was incredible!" Petra cheers.

Spotting a 12-meter class Titan, Oluo gives a twist, tries to execute the same maneuver. I know it's a doomed effort, long Before he even takes form. I'm all for audacity, shaking the rules up every now and then, but this isn't the time to take artistic fucking liberties. Oluo overdoes it, throws too much force in at the wrong time, and he goes spinning like a top, to the surprise of no one.

"Don't start trying fancy tricks, now Oluo!" Petra snaps. "You'll get yourself killed! Not everyone can pull off moves like Captain."

Switching back to standard technique, he ends his target before shooting her a saucy look.

"Aw, you worried 'bout me Ral?"

"Hardly, just don't want to clean your blood off of the walls after you crash and burn!"

Shit, that's harsh, and that's coming from me. The woman has a tongue like a viper, when she wants. A vicious slayer tucked into a cute, sunny package. It's all the more pitiful when you realize he's obviously only doing it because he's into her, but Petra is having none of it.

Nevertheless, we can't have the Garrison's already piss-poor image of us further soured, now can we? Reputation is fucking essential.

"Oy, are we the Special Ops Squad or a gaggle of fucking cadets? Let's see some damn professionalism."

They mumble out apologies, ducking their heads and returning their focus to slaying. Trost looks like an earthquake hit, after a massive inferno that rolled through, following an all-out civil war.
And that's being fucking generous.

Streets below are empty. Rivers of stone. I Don't bother wondering who has survived and who hasn't. Tried to learn as much about them as I could in the short time we had together. It's always too fucking short.

You want to know the three rules to surviving the Survey Corps? Keep your head down, push on and don't get your hopes up; that's what I've learned.

Mind-numbing, all this shitty pomp and circumstance. It's no more than a circus led by trussed up pigs. Humanity's first viable chance against the Titans and our revered leaders start frothing at the mouth, wanting to burn the Yeager brat at the stake. Titan-turd looks terrified out of his wits, pleading every few seconds, not quite seeming to get the concept that a gag will prevent anyone from understanding you.

The main porker of these proceedings is a shithead who goes by the name of Niles Dok, head of the Military Police, with the position of vice-porker being occupied by the Minister Spitface. Always interesting, watching Erwin in the presence of Dok; don't know the details, but somehow he managed to steal Erwin's girl way back when. For his part, Eyebrows is as calm as ever, placid as a fucking lake, but I know this shit runs deep.

Next thing I know, they're calling her to the stand. Head held high, Mitras runt marches as if she belongs here, but I know better. Mouth pursed into a tight little line, movements just a little too stiff, to be natural. Calling on her inner insufferable noble, she slips into a high Mitras accent, name-dropping her ample connections from her time inside Wall Sina. Trying to establish rapport. Valiant effort, but the prosecution made up its mind long before Yeager was dragged in.

She survives Dok's gauntlet relatively unscathed, but it's when Minister Spitface floods the floor with his presence that things get interesting.

I'm too busy trying to keep us all alive to even bother myself with what the fuck happens after death, but if I did believe in religion, I wouldn't want it to be represented by this piece of work. He's everything I thought Mitras schooled her to be: judgemental, holier-than-thou and self-absorbed to the hilt. I don't know how she's managed to avoid inheriting selfishness and arrogance that seem to be part and parcel of her people. Adorable little mutant.

He's not even making a point, just lashing her in front of the court, the prick. Mitras runt looks positively crestfallen to see this side of her beloved faith's leadership. Jury starts whispering, crowd gets all antsy, even Dok knows that this has gone too far and will work against him.

Lucky for Spitface, Erwin and Zackly step in before I get the chance. Guess maybe prayer does work.

But that's when I notice it.

Her eyes turns to steel, matched with a pleasant smile. Borderline unnerving. She's polite, but proud as all fuck, not one to suffer disrespect. Whether it's campaigning for Marco or charging Bertolt, she's got nerve. I hate to admit that this display has piqued my interest in the little runt's next move; there's a building thrill of excitement, wondering how she's possibly going to respond to being torn apart by her idol.
...hot damn, look at Mitras go.

How the **hell** do they even belong to same institution anyways? The Church of Walls must be schizophrenic, because one of its followers wants to serve mankind, the other wants to line his pockets. His *logwood-mixed-with-metal-dyed* pockets.

She's fucking reaming him with his own teachings, showing Spitface what it means to be a true believer in the Walls. I catch Erwin's eye, and he's smirking too. Holy shit, who needs 3DMG when we can just unleash *this* berserker on the Titans.

Dok's regretting having ever laid eyes on her, motioning to Zackly who promptly axes her testimony and orders her out.

Won't you just *look* at that undue influence. Dok calling the shots to Zackly? Playtime's fucking over. I need to slap some sense into the jury before Dok's granted any more time to make his point.

Erwin gives me the go-ahead with his eyes. We're good like that, fucking twins.

I got the handsome genes though.

'Tis a pity I have to beat the shit out of that Titan-spawn to make a point, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't the most fun I've had in a while. It's just that he loses his shit so fucking easily. Over everything.

**HOLY FUCK GUYS, A TITAN.**

**NO FUCKING WAY GUYS, AN ADVANCED EXERCISE.**

**SOMEONE FUCKING PINCH ME GUYS, IT'S MEAT DAY AT THE MESS HALL.**

Smell *that*?

That *stench*?

No, it's not their reeking piggish hides, but that's a good guess. It's their fear- and I fucking *love* it. *Thrive* off of it.

Dok and Minister Spitface are pissing their pants right now, knowing that I'm imagining them in Yeager's place.

Shit, was that a tooth that just came flying out? Better reign it in. Just this last kick.

One more.

...
Alright after the next one, scout's fucking honor.

My night vision is better than Petra's, so I see it first, muscles locking rigid. It takes Petra a couple seconds to catch sight of it, before she gasps.

I'd recognize her anywhere; not that I can make out much of her features from here, but because she radiates a sense of... I don't even know what the fuck it is. Suffice it to say she's an annoyingly conspicuous fucking beacon. One that's slowly, surely and irritatingly becoming impossible to avoid picking up on.

But that's not even the best fucking part.
The kicker to this little spectacle, is that she has her arms thrown around Kirschtein.

Yes, that Kirschtein. King of fucking horse-kind.

Gone not two days. Two fucking days. I can still smell the turmeric rising from the kettle, still feel her press her lips into mine, hopeful but uncertain, a butterfly that darts away before you've even realized it's landed on you. You can take the girl out of fucking Mitras, but you can't take the fucking Mitras out of the girl. Fucking Mitras, where people are just disposable as things. Maybe more so.

I mean, I get it. He's in her circle, they hang out a lot, shit's bound to happen. All else considered, he's one of my favorite brats, not that I'd ever tell. Besides, if you want to be technical about it, it's not like she and I ever established anything. No promises were made or broken. Technically, nothing solidified. But if you had bothered to ask me, I'd hardly call it nothing. Didn't think you needed a fucking contract to ensure basic decency. The way she stood up for Bott, how she piped up for Titan-spawn at court...she always seemed like the type to value people, treat them with consideration.

Loyal.

Well, my fucking mistake. Guess that nothing is exactly what it was.

There she is, burying her face in the hideous, two-toned mane of this horse, making the realistic choice, the one I told her to make, while I'm left standing here like a fool with his head up his own ass.

"Oh," Petra sighs softly, and I suddenly feel the warmth of her head settle into my shoulder. "That's so sweet...having someone who will always be there for you. Wouldn't that be nice, Captain?"

Nice to not have the weight of mankind on my fucking shoulders? Yes, yes it fucking would. My mind can't help but sneak down a path it knows it fucking shouldn't, one that has no place in this world...but what would it look like, if there was room for it? With Petra, it's easy to imagine. She's cute, reliable, always been at my side. I get the feeling some people have even grown to expect it as an eventual possibility. Content with the body by my side.

But (F/N)...(F/N)...even her name even sounds foreign on my tongue, a colorful delicacy from a far away world. We're a painfully stark contrast, night and fucking day, yet similar in a way I can't decode.
...don't I just sound like the biggest asshole? What the ever-loving fuck, was I even expecting to happen? That humanity's saving could wait, be put on hold a while? That we'd get together, have a fucking cottage with some obnoxious runts of our own and some damn daisies popping out front? Bide our time with a stable trade, one with a slightly better expiration date? A part of me wants to kick myself at the sheer stupidity of it all. Farlan wouldn't let me hear the fucking end of it, if he were here.

Because I have a mission to tend to, a goal in mind. Being Humanity's Strongest comes with a price.

Even if I didn't fucking ask for it.

"It would," I agree, voice heavy as the weights that keep barges anchored. Cold and final. "Then again, the impossible dreams are always the nicest of them."

The words come out with more bite to them than I intend, because Petra shuts right up, cringing. Shit, I never meant to take this out on her. She smartly decides to change the subject.

"W-why don't I fix us up some tea, Captain?"

"Don't bother," I say, tone a bit more docile. "Your time is better spent recovering from today. Go rest up; I need to get stitched up anyways."

"Oh, I can patch you right up! Petra replies brightly. "The nurses are so overworked that they hardly ever have the time to do it properly."

That's Petra for you, dedicated like no other. It's nice of her to volunteer, especially after the clusterfuck that was reconquering Trost. I thank her. We hike up to the infirmary in silence, retreating as the wind carries their hushed whispers over the grass.

Guess that's how it works in Mitras. Out of sight, out of mind. The only people who matter are those who can give you something.

Pain flickers, blood trickling out as she puts a gloved finger in it. Testing fuck knows what.

"Doesn't that hurt?" bright hazel eyes want to know.

"More or less," I grunt out.

She marvels at this apparent fucking medical wonder of learning how to deal with pain. Feather-light touches get to work, prodding and petting at the bare skin of my back. I know she's doing it just to make me feel better, feigning this shitty amazement, but somehow it just bothers me more.

Of all the shitty rooms in this shitty castle, Erwin and Hange have chosen the Infirmary as the site for our debriefing. It's mainly Hange doing the talking, summing up where we're at. Petra and I have a pretty damn good idea, given that my Squad was first on the scene. Mike is in the back, rummaging through the glass cabinets. Loudly does he rummage. What the fuck is he even doing? I swear he's getting high off the smelling salts because he's been staring at that bottle with a moronic expression for an awfully long time.
As fascinating as Mike's trip is, my attention is caught by what Erwin decides to share with the class. Mitras runt apparently decided to rally a group of like-minded maniacs and charge the Armored Titan- because apparently charging Hoover head-on just wasn't exciting enough. At least she's consistent.

And here to help set a record for most intolerable meeting in the history of humanity is the woman of the hour herself.

Hardly a few minutes in and she's bleeding praise for Kirschtein like he pays her fucking commission. Kissing so much of his ass that Kirschtein should be arrested for indecent exposure. Maybe she and Jean have whatever it is Petra and I have? But that thought disturbs me, and more importantly why the fuck am I still thinking about this?

*Enough*. Time to put a fucking end to this sycophantic vomit.

"Someone get a fucking mop, she's drooling," I sneer. Hook, line and sinker. Simple, yet so beautifully effective. Petra tries to convince me their little tryst is cute. All it takes is one line, a little assist from Petra, and the entire room is laughing at her at my command. Victory washes over me like a bath of fucking roses. Mitras runt is changing colors like the rainbow. She spins toward me, shocked and pale. Face darkening in confusion. Then the striking pink of hurt.

*Good*. Maybe she'll think twice before dabbling in shit she can't handle.

Before doing things she doesn't mean.

But as the laughter and tittering grows around her, the high fades quickly, leaving a sour taste in my mouth.

Hange decides she's feeling sympathetic- but this woman has adopted Titans, so that's not exactly saying much- and rescues princess from her untimely demise. It's fucking catching, because Erwin decides she needs some encouragement too, and Mitras runt devours Erwin's praise like it's a fucking seven star gourmet meal. Marches out of the Infirmary with her head held like a banner of war, as Hange throws me a pointed look.

A heaviness settles deep into my gut. Shutting my eyes, I wait till Petra finishes me up before slipping out after them.

Hange is nowhere to be found, but her babysitter is putting on a fucking show for the Titan-children.

Just to be clear, we're in a dark pen, in the middle of the night, in a secluded field with two barely restrained man-eating giants, and *this one* is practically cartwheeling across. Given this lovely fucking pretext, I really can't be blamed for seizing her by the neck and shoving her forward, dangling her like bait, to show her just how quickly everything can go to shit.

Mitras runt has the audacity to throw Erwin's praise of her in my face, as if a couple of pretty words will somehow guarantee her future survival. She's letting it get to her head, the cheeky brat.
"If I didn't know better, I'd say you care," she singsongs.

...what the fuck kind of comeback is that? Of course I care. I'm an asshole but I'm an asshole who means well. I release her, allow her to turn around and face me. She's smirking like she just landed a killing blow.

"And? What of it? Unless you have a reason that I shouldn't value your life?"

She looks like I just told her we're (finally and dishonorably) discharging her from the Corps: utterly dejected.

Again, I've fucking said the wrong thing and I don't even understand how. I've told her I fucking care about her life, shouldn't someone be receptive to that? Pleased, even? Instead, her head's hanging as she looks for mold between the Titan's shitty toes or something. Fucking hell, when they shipped her off from Mitras why didn't they provide a user's manual?

Silently, I move closer to her, boots padding on the damp grass like it's thin ice. Like she's some mythical creature that will disappear into the woods at the slightest scare. She's still completely absorbed in Titan-child's hideous nails, which is a pretty insulting excuse to avoid looking at me.

...would touch help? A hand on her shoulder? Patting her back? Wisps of hair that have escaped her hair-tie dance in the wind, hypnotizing. Before I realize, my fingers are lured forward, climbing through the air of their own accord. She sighs but it's as loud as thunder, sobering like a bucket of ice water to the face. My traitorous, cowardly fucking hand immediately retreats.

"You have...promise," I mutter. "I'd hate to see it wasted."

Surprise colors her and she turns to regard me, suspicious and hesitant and daring to be hopeful. She's staring me right in the eyes, unblinking, and something tells me she's never looked at Kirschtein with this intensity. So close I can see the pores on her cheeks, the little spokes that grow from her pupils into the very tip of her iris. My mouth is parched, like I haven't seen a drop of water in weeks, and I have to fucking cut this off now.

This thing is dangerous, consuming. A threat to the promises I've made the many, many people who are unfortunate enough to follow me. I order her out of the pen, back to her barracks, without looking back once.

There's a reason Erwin never gave me the name of the mission partner. There's also a reason I follow this fucker, but it's the same reason that makes me want to wring his neck half the time I'm around him. Cunning as all fuck.

In walks Mitras princess, oblivious as ever. Erwin plays dumb, as if he's unaware of the bad blood between us.

Dumb like a fucking fox.

Apparently, Erwin wants to try this fun social experiment where we send a complete, fresh-faced noob into the den of fucking wolves that lies waiting in Mitras. The circles that our priss here has never even dreamed of brushing elbows with. I'll be surprised if she even knows they exist. See, these predators are a far bigger threat than the Titans can ever hope to be.

I voice some pretty damn reasonable objections, but they make like they don't hear me, the
assholes. Maybe he genuinely doesn't. With all the hair on his eyebrows, I'm guessing he has a forest sprouting in his ears, the hairy fuck. I'm going to shave then off, I swear to fuck. Try rallying the troops then, *you bald freak*. I tell him as much, but he doesn't seem to mind. Now that I think about it, why do we even bother using flares on the expeditions? Erwin can just raise his massive face-caterpillars for all to see.

Right eyebrow raised, *Titan to the right!*

Left one quirks, *Titan to the left!*

Both raised, *we're all fucked!*

I ask priss to give us a minute. Runty obliges, shutting the door behind her quietly. She's bold and wily, this one, hovering outside of the door as if neither I nor the fucking Commander of the Survey Corps realize she's there. Only when I hear her finally disappear down the hall do I begin. And begin with the grace of a fucking diplomat, I might add.

"No fucking way, not a fucking chance, no, a toddler armed only with a broken pie roller smack dab in Titan territory has a better life expectancy, by the way did I mention hell fucking no?" I hiss. "Thought you meant a Garrison officer, or that you hadn't yet decided. Not a fucking amateur."

"She's clever and she's got the connections we need," Erwin says simply. As if that's all you would need to outmaneuver these particular fuckers.

"True though that may be," I hiss, "We're dealing with the elites of the MP and Church of the Walls. You know the shit they've pulled in the Underground, the bodies they've got rotting all over the place. Someone like her, she doesn't have the venom in her for shit like this. If she corners one and they plead for mercy, she'll give it to them without another thought. Never see the bullet between her eyes coming."

He even *smiles* like a fox, blue eyes glinting like he knows exactly where the farmer keeps the chickens.

"Come now, Levi, I'm not cold-blooded enough to needlessly ship a Private off to her death. She won't be with you *entire* time." He pulls a drawer open, produces a silver vial. "The latest concoction from Hange's Research and Development team."

He gingerly extends it over the desk like its contraband. Plucking it out of his hand, I turn it beneath the light filtering in through the window.

"A sedative," he elaborates. "Her primary purpose is to serve as your vessel, give you a cover. Once you arrive at her home, and the time is right, you'll inject her with this. She'll be out like a light, tucked safely at home, with no chance of risking herself or jeopardizing the mission. Win-win."

As I peer into it, the liquid distorts Erwin's image into something grotesque. Bizarre.

*Titan-like.*

"There's no such thing as a win-win," I mutter to vial-Erwin.

Vial-Erwin remains quiet.
There are two kids running around, threading the customs line like needles, and it's getting on my last nerve.

To further kindle this lovely little clusterfuck, the customs agent has taken it upon himself to become a douche. It's funny, real funny, how this pig doesn't know he's talking to a guy who could skewer him like a kebab. Stupid. But that's what makes them pigs; Porkchop here doesn't see a reason for Mitras runt's crotchety great uncle to enter Mitras. Between his pissiness, the heat of this itchy damn coat and the kids screaming in the next line, my patience has been shot.

And it shows.

Runty is hemming and hawing for me to shut up, bred to fear these pigs I guess. Like I'm going to take orders from my fake great niece. Respect your fucking elders, priss. Kids these days, I swear. Shrugging off her arm, I turn my attention to the porker.

My voice is hoarse with rage, hoarse with the pain of the thousands of lives I've lost, the thousands of lives that brought me here to this moment. It strikes a cord in every one of the luckless bastards waiting with us. The horror, the indignity, the fucking fury of being left behind as Titan kibble while Mitras' finest sip wines behind Wall Sina, deaf to our screams.

Eyes shining, Mitras princess looks impressed, as much as she tries to hide it. I wipe the smirk off my face before it threatens to light my whole face up. The fuckface grudgingly hands us our papers, says some shit as we pass onto the barge. Oink oink, probably.

Once we successfully settle on the barge, papers in hand, I allow myself to get a good look at her. Her face is paler than usual, gaunt. Hair knotted in a bun. The round-the-clock storm of adrenaline since the Fall of Trost and its reconquering has worn on her. While the other privates have at least been returned to standard training, she hasn't caught a break. Mitras runt is nervous about this mission, obsessed with performing well and exceeding our expectations. Proving she belongs here. And yet, even when she's out of uniform on a sunny day like she is now, her arms are covered in longer sleeves. Like that scar is a fucking gang tattoo, a disgrace to her family. Guess where she's from, it might be.

"You should eat," I point out.

"No thank you, sir," comes the prissy response, words acidic enough to trigger vomiting.

What the actual fuck, Mitras runt? Here I am looking out for you, and this is the thanks I get? Seriously what the fuck is controversial or rude about telling someone to eat? Mitrassians would take offense to fucking air, if they could. When I'm strict, I'm an asshole, and when I try to be nice I'm still an asshole. There's no winning with this one. May as well just be my raging, asshole-ish self.

Runt just sits there with her eyes closed, as if I'll disappear because she can't see me. Well, maybe I fucking will. I make way on deck past playing children, making sure to strike crippling fear into their hearts. There aren't many perks to this particular undercover identity, but this is definitely one of them. Descending the plank, I stroll past stalls until I find a merchant peddling sandwiches.

"What can I get you, sir?"
Shit.

Does she eat meat? I think she likes cheese. Made a whole fucking show of it when we went treat-hunting for Bott. Passing the coins over, I return to Mitras runt, who hasn't moved a centimeter from where she plopped asleep. Oh yeah, the MPs are definitely going to cower in their fucking boots when they see her.

Shoving the sandwich straight into her gut, I hope that maybe she'll get the hint and fucking eat. She snaps awake and I can't help the fuzzy feeling inside, relishing her *much-deserved* shock with unholy glee. I introduce her to the Mitras Priss Special, with extra cheese. She doesn't seem too happy that I've named a delicacy after her, the ungrateful brat. It takes an additional 10 minutes of debate to actually *convince* her to eat, the last undertaking before I can finally sit in peace.

I jut an elbow out over the edge, catching the spray of the river on my cheeks. Wind courses through my hair, chasing a pleasant chill down my heated neck. Rolling emerald hills stream past us, the color of Isabel's eyes. She'd love this: the manicured, terraced gardens, the towering cedars, the limitless expanse of blue sky. You really learn to value nature when it's taken away from you. I can hear her excited voice, practically see her gazing in wonder-

"-you like some?"

Princess is apparently making some announcement; to my surprise, I turn to find the sandwich I've brought her held up in offering.

...this.

After being raised with 3 square meals a day in a capital where the cupboards and markets never run out of stock, she joined a world of strict rations and food shortages. Anyone else in her position would be hoarding free food.

But she's trying to be generous.

*This. This* right here. This is the girl who challenged a mob of her peers. This is the girl who challenged *me* when I praised Arlert's dirty but effective tactics. This is the girl who thrashed Minister Nick to save Titan-turd, knowing he could kick her out of her beloved Church.

This is the reason why.

"No, save your strength," I say. "Besides, you probably fucking spit in it when I wasn't looking."

"What will *you* eat then?" she persists.

Fucking *stop it.*

Simple words, but so *compassionate, so sincere* in their intention that it threatens to thaw my resolve, undo everything. Summoning my most terrifying face, I cow her into silence. It'd be funny if it wasn't so fucking adorable.

Never mind, it's still funny.
A gigantic, liquid *plop* assaults my ears. A good quarter of sandwich that I brought her has landed onto her lap. I swear to fuck, I turn away for all of 4 seconds to try and enjoy the view, and she's already sprouted a fucking cornfield on her face. There are crumbs everywhere, crumbs in places where crumbs should never be. How she got some on the bridge of her nose, I'll never know. Grumbling, I rip out a handkerchief and get to mother-henning, with more force than strictly necessary. Don't get fucking paid enough for this.

She hasn't seen her parents, the most important people in her life, for a year; how can she not take more pains in her appearance? This is a fucking occasion that demands *presentation. Excellence*.

"I would think they would just be happy to see me," she replies, pensive.

Happy just to see her? *Just* to see her? It's so confident, so assured of their affection, like she could set a village on fire and they'd still finagle some way to love her. Suddenly I'm transported into dark caverns, into a world of red lights, sharp knives and even sharper hunger.

This is why I don't feel like talking much.

_Sorry princess, but your mom has got it going *on._

By which I mean I've never seen a table, outside of the imperial palace banquets, set so beautifully. Pristine implements, with not so much as a fingerprint on them. Serrated parts of the blades face the plates. Forks arranged in proper order- salad fork on the inside, dinner fork on the outside. They're all even set the exact same millimeter distance. Fucking *orgasmic* is what is.

Miras runt's mom is a sharp one, observant. She's quick to notice how I effortlessly shift between utensils during courses, use the proper sauces. She compares it to her daughter, who just seems happy to eat.

What's more Princess' mom reciprocates my feelings; that woman has *excellent* taste, let me tell you. Granted, it took a bit for her to warm up to me. When we got there, she was all hushed angry whispers, and I made like I didn't hear. Stung like a bitch, but not too different from the underground days, when shopkeepers would give Farlan and I the evil eye when we hung around. Assuming we would steal.

I mean granted, we fucking _would_, but it still smarted. We wouldn't have to if they bothered to at least give us the scraps or the expired shit. Thanking runty's mom for the meal, I begin collecting dishes but she insists otherwise, tells me to go relax in her brat's room. God, I love this woman.

Once the pleasantries are over, all that remains is the weight of the mission, caught heavy in my chest like a morsel I can't swallow. Slipping in, I close the door behind me, looking around with the giddiness of a kid who knows he's trespassing. Stuffed animals scattered across cotton bedsheets, surprisingly sentimental. A full bookcase, littered with small trinkets. Awards adorning the walls from her time at the cesspool that must be Sina Academy. A collection of fine quills.

There's some earthy about the room, simple and soft and warm.

Spreading towels on the quilt, I break out of the cast and start unloading the stash that fucking pig was too dim to catch. Fucking _finally_, the damn metal has been carving into my skin all day. As I'm wiping the implements clean, Miras runt nearly breaks the fucking door down, waltzing in and
going on about soap.

Fucking soap, mind you, when she just nearly exposed the entire operation. I swear, she's either eerily cunning or blissfully unawares, dizzying me with how quickly she shifts between the two. Livid, I berate her, but she seems far more interested in how these were snuck in.

Asks what she can do to help. Erwin's orders flash in my mind; suddenly, the syringe feels sharp in my pocket, metal biting into my thigh. I throw out the first distraction I can think of.

"Count and wipe the bullets. Twice."

She dives into the work, but from the corner of my eye I catch her suddenly turning purple. Queasy looking. We better not be about to get a second look at the Mitras Priss special with extra cheese, because I just fucking cleaned those guns.

"Never shot a gun before?" I ask.

She's eyeing the bullets as if they'll bite her, as if she's watching them bury into the squelching hearts of our asshole targets. And I marvel at how, among the flesh-eating giants that have driven our people to near extinction, the world has still grown someone this precious. This warm-hearted.

"Once, and it didn't really end well," she mumbles.

As I absorb her hesitance, something begins forming in the back of my mind, clicking together. I beckon her closer. "We've got time. I'll teach you. It'll be easier to carry this out if I know you have basic fucking survival skills."

As she rises to her feet, I lick my fingers and snuff out the candle. The last of the flame's life flees with a little hiss, plunging the room into darkness. Having been born in the darkness, grown in it, my eyes adjust instantly. Mitras runt, on the other hand, is thrown her for a loop, fidgeting at the realization that sight has been stolen from her.

"Shut your eyes," I murmur from behind her, near enough to bathe in that exquisite scent. "You're going to keep trying to see if they're open."

My toe nudges her heels shoulder-width apart, as I wordlessly finger the ice-cold metal nipping into my thigh. With one hand, I pull her dominant leg back; with the other, I edge the the syringe out of my pocket. A gentle push to the small of her back, as the needle climbs up to her jugular.

Hopefully I managed to give her one last, good memory before having to knock her out.

"Goodbye, (F/N)."

Fuck, it's crept into my voice. It's subtle but she picks up on it. I know she does the second the word leaves my lips, hollow and hanging in the air, know she has detected something off-register. Fucking observant at the worst possible time.

I lunge forward anyways.

Runt decides to be quick, darting forward and smacking the shutters open, shedding moonlight on this betrayal. She takes one look at the syringe and bolts towards the door, but you don't get to be anywhere within the Survey Corps if you don't have the skill to back it up. I wrench her back, prying her fingers off the doorknob with the force of the movement. Just as I reel her in to deliver
the sedative, she *works with* the momentum, taking her knees out of commission and dropping us to the floor.

Now she's giving me a *thesis fucking defense* about the injustice of trying to keep her out of trouble. Well, my *sincerest* apologies for not doing a merry fucking jig the idea of dragging a newly-minted Private to tangle with some of the most cold-blooded fuckers alive on this accursed earth. And, *simmer down*, bleeding-heart, it's a sedative not fucking cocaine.

With all the noise we're making, her parents are going to come knocking any minute now. I need to incapacitate her *immediately*. So I appeal to her *rationality*, explaining *why* this is necessary. That we're *protecting* her and her family, sparing them from becoming entangled with danger on our behalf. Upon hearing this, *naturally*, Mitras runt proceeds to flip her shit. If I thought Titan-spawn was bad, this brat has absolutely no fucking chill. *None*. She's squirming and kicking and squawking and I really see no alternative to pinning her down, roping her to the foot of the bed and stuffing a face towel in her incessant mouth.

For a few seconds, I bask in the blissful silence that seems fucking impossible whenever she's around. How I've missed *this*. Just as I grip the needle, preparing to finish the job, the full impact of this scene hits me.

She's pinned down. Roped to the bed. Gagged. Glaring at the futility of her situation.

Sweat begins crawling down my spine.

If the events of the last few days have shown me anything, it's that Mitras runt could use a little *discipline*. In fact, I'd be doing her a fucking favor. The syringe transforms into a paintbrush in my hand as I drag it along the canvas of her skin, swirling wherever I damn please. I dance it around her mouth, tease it between her lips before dropping it in.

Order her to fucking clean it *raw*.

There's surprisingly little resistance. Dutifully, she scrubs at the syringe. But then, her tongue gets a little overzealous. Carried away. She licks my finger.

Fucking *licks my finger*, I shit you not. At first, I chalk it up to an accident and get ready to wrap up our little penalty session. But then she does it again. And *again*. Then to another. I fucking swear she's doing it on purpose.

Naughty, *naughty* Mitras runt.

"*Good girl,*" I purr. The praise triggers something and suddenly she takes to it with *relish*, warm tongue darting out, sliding up and down, wetting every crease in the skin over my knuckles. She's still glaring, but there's no fire behind it. Those lips are threatening to curl into a cruel little smile.

*Fuck*, that's hot. Triumph pumps through my veins, a bitter satisfaction. Maybe all that sass, all that running to Kirschstein is just her trying to repress what she already knows.
What we both know.

I feel warmth settling into my crotch and lift myself just a little higher on my haunches. I'll be damned to wander fucking Titan wastelands for eternity before I let this impudent little runt learn the extent of her influence. Tch, what a fucking disgrace. Letting a Private, a damn Private of all things, get under my skin this much. Especially when I have a shit-ton of work to do. The effect she has, it just isn't fair.

But now the playing field is even.

She looks her most beautiful like this, overwhelmed but stubbornly hanging onto her pride. Oh, how I'm going to enjoy stripping her of that rambunctious pride. Also, just stripping her in general. I feel bad almost, but then I see the ravenous look in her eye, the blush across her face, the delicious sounds that she's trying to bite down and I start to think I might not be the only one infected with this madness.

Drop the games, drop your walls.

Let me in.

Just come out and say it.

I know you fucking want to.

Perhaps she just needs some direction. A show of encouragement.

So I'll give her a show. One that has her desperately, wildly howling my name right up until the moment I put her to sleep.
Whew, rough couple of weeks. So sorry this update has taken so long; will elaborate a bit later. Thank you everyone who continues to support this work! Still need to answer several comments, but this last month has been quite the whirlwind.

At any rate, hope it was worth the wait <3

Warmth.
It's cozy here, where you're nestled, blankets tucked under your chin. Soft morning light filters through the window, with bright chirping outside.

Why did you wake up again? It feels like you have slumbered a lifetime, the best sleep you've ever had. Your eyelids droop down like they carry the weight of the world, and you burrow further into your little nest. You're sure whatever it is can wait a couple minutes, or better yet, until tomorrow.... so warm-

BANG

BANG

BANG

Your senses are dumped unceremoniously back onto you: you're name is (F/N) (L/N), you're tucked into your bed at your parents house and there is screaming and yelling and banging coming from the other side of your door- which is being violently manhandled- and what the hell is going on?

Batting away the covers, you dart to your feet and nearly fly across the room. Odd, you don't seem to have full control of your muscles. Staggering forward, you tear open the door, behind which stands your shouting mother. Armed with a skillet, she's attempting to clobber him, to burn the witch who snuck into her home and abused her hospitality.

Except, he's not here right now. In fact, it's only you, and would she please use her indoor voice, your head is pounding-

Instead, she seizes your bicep and throws you behind her as she charges into your bedroom.

"Where is he?" She hisses, enraged. She waves her skillet about, likely terrifying your stuffed animals. And that's when exactly what occurred last night, every last sordid detail, slams into you. Your cheeks light up with color, the traitorous parts of your body igniting with vestiges of his lingering touch. Ears ringing with your breathy pleas, eyes burning with the memory of the triumphant curl of his lip as you writhe- head snapping down, you find- to your immense relief- that you are fully clothed, bundled neatly into sleepwear you have no memory of putting on.
What in the name of every crevice between every stone within every one of the Three Holy Walls possessed you to surrender to his wanton advances? He'll never let you live this down, never let you retract those mewling cries of yours. And while you're on the subject, what possessed him?

You are Mitras runt, the target of his contempt, that wayward and unconventional subordinate, the final weight that toppled down the house of cards that is his composure.

And yet- he inserted himself into your quest to bring Marco a gift basket, not to mention turned a blind eye to your numerous violations of the sacred law that is trainee curfew. He charged himself with being your slightly bitchy healer, tending to your injuries. Being your weird and vulgar and hilarious coach, urging you to push through your bitter tears, to shed the shame and frustration at having the full use of your arm stolen from you. Your cantankerous guardian, who somehow knows that you're a proud member of the Church of The Walls and that you have a devastating weakness for fine cheeses, despite never having told him.

Also, he kissed you while tipsy on his birthday.

...and did far more while not drunk.

.........before knocking you out cold.

.............after teaching you proper gun-wielding technique.

...............then again maybe that was his way of protecting you from the inevitable dangers of this mission, stalking the Military Police and Church elites?

......................or exploiting you for the benefits of your family's lofty connection to Mitras then casting you away like used wrapping paper?

What the hell is Levi smoking and where can you discretely get a metric ton of it? He's absolutely unfathomable, and that's always been your thing, fathoming people. Sniffing out their intentions. Born and bred amid the cunning and deceit and social grace of Mitras, you were made for it. Possibilities buzz around your mind. Was he just messing with you, seeing how easily you would give in to him? Punishing you for challenging him, degrading you into submission? Fooling around because this overworked ballistic shrimp is seriously sexually frustrated? .....seeking retribution possibly, but for what? For hanging around Jean? Preposterous. Certainly, Levi kissed you, but he was drunk. The fearsome Captain of the Special Ops had promised you nothing, and so you owe him nothing beyond standard obligations. Besides, you enjoy Jean's company.

See, Jean just so happens to be fathomable.

Walls damn him, your head hurts too much to sort through this at the moment; you'll need to even the score later. For now, your mother's furious words spill out of her, and you quickly tune back in.

"What are you doing in his room?" she demands, hunting around your room for her target. "Why aren't you in the guest room!? And why is this hooligan's room locked?"

The excuse is surprisingly swift. Smooth. "He left early in the morning because he didn't want to
burden you," you say with an even smile. "I saw him out and then reclaimed my room. No need to worry!"

A positively livid gaze pins you where you stand, as the skillet makes its way dangerously close to you. "No need to worry? No need to worry? You bring a strange man onto our doorstep in the middle of the night, and the next day you're nowhere to be found! Walls give me strength! Seems like a lack of common sense is a requirement for joining that blasted Surveillance Corps of yours!"

"Survey," you grit out. "Survey Corps, not surveil-"

"Frankly, I don't care what that little death cult is called," your mother announces, face coloring with fury. "Doesn't matter when half of them will be gone by the next day anyways. They abuse our taxpayers' hard-earned money just to send our sons and daughters OUT TO DIE!"

The skillet clatters to the ground as your mother dissolves into sobs. The metal carves a mean scratch into the wood, an angry white against the rich, dark background- impossible to ignore. Stunned, you begin to realize all the many ways your decision to join the Survey Corps has impacted your family. Gone from home for nearly a year, correspondence lagging as you struggle just to survive the brutal training regimen, stationed on humanity's front lines. You can imagine your mom, bustling away in her workshop, one eye on her current project and the other on the door, awaiting with dread the moment she might receive that fatal knock.

Two young soldiers, decked in dark ceremonial garb, on her doorstep. A tattered green cape with intertwining wings rests on their palms, held up before her.

"Ma'am, are you Mrs. (L/N)? Mother of (F/N)?"

"Yes, that's me. Can I help you?"

"We regret to inform you-"

Shaking the grotesque thoughts out of your head, you offer her an unsteady smile and pull her close, murmuring again that she has nothing to worry about and that everything will be fine. In your arms, the sobs still.

Even you almost believe it.

After a small eternity, your mother at last decides it's safe to part with you and leaves you to your own devices. While you assist her as she prepares breakfast, you realize ballistic-shrimp has left you a souvenir:

\[ \textit{eyebrows at 36} \]

is scrawled onto a scrap of paper in familiar, rushed handwriting, hidden in your pajama pocket. Seems your role in this mission has entirely expired. What's more, looks like you'll be returning to the base on your own- Erwin granted you 3 days to complete the mission, one of which has already passed.

....which means Levi intends on departing Mitras before you.
Suddenly, you feel incredibly young and small. What were you expecting? A farewell card and bouquet of roses?

Frowning, you try not to let disappointment weigh down on you, try instead to focus on cracking the eggs without letting any shells filter in. See your mother's eyes are basically human microscopes; no doubt, she'll be able to zero in on the most infinitesimal fragment of egg-shell that slips through your fingers into the batter, and like a reasonable woman, possibly burn the neighborhood down in response.

You pass the next few days relaxing with your family; the reprise from the Survey Corps ends painfully quickly, and you need to pry yourself out of your mother's grasp as your family sees you off with smiles that don't quite reach their eyes.

The trip back is abysmally lonely. Silence hangs over you like a storm-cloud, even as you thread your way through the crowds in front of Border Patrol (much easier in this direction), even while you get elbowed and jostled on a cramped barge. In the midst of civilization yet totally alone. There's something missing, a completely despicable yet reassuring presence you have (begrudgingly) become accustomed to. Your heart aches for him- not with a blindly infatuated, fairy-tale kind of obsession, but rather with a simmering hopefulness. You want to know his mind. You want to speak with him; you don't care so much the outcome, so long as there is one.

This constant back-and-forth, the ruthless pendulum of his demeanor is gradually unraveling you, conquering your attention. The longer you let this persist- whatever in the wide lands guarded by the Holy Walls that this actually is- the less energy you'll be able to devote to the Corps.

...but by the time you return to Headquarters, Levi is nowhere to be found.

Neither is the Special Operations Squad. Or Hange and Eren.

Commander Erwin welcomes you into his office with the sunny composure of a man whose job doesn't involve leading humanity's last stand against flesh-eating giants. You give him your brief report, injecting as many indignant references to his orders as you think he'll allow.

"...and that concludes my report, given that I was sedated, which- surprisingly- compromised how useful I can be."

Erwin doesn't miss a beat.

"I'm sure you tried your best," he murmurs, chin perched on top of his bridged fingers. "Thank you for your hard work, Private (L/N). You may return to the regularly scheduled activities of your cohort."
Blinking, you allow a few moments to pass, giving him time to let more information about the
details of the mission results slip. Erwin doesn't take the bait; in fact, he hardly spares it a second
thought. Glimmering blue eyes are watching you, blue like twin robin eggs, as he smiles. With no
juicy details forthcoming, and no mention of your mission partner, you're forced to retreat.
Reluctantly, you drag yourself to your feet and head towards the door, but just as you wrap your
fingers around the brass, he offers you a final warning.

"Ah, Private (L/N)! One more thing. We have informed your peers that you returned to Mitras due
to a family medical emergency. I trust you understand?"

All that hard work and preparation, for absolutely no recognition. You were a ticket, a *key*, and you
can't help the broiling feelings of betrayal that consume any positive thoughts of Levi and Erwin.
Seems as though self-absorption is not an exclusive product of Mitras. Granted, Levi and Erwin
may have nobler intentions, thinking on the scale of humanity rather than just themselves, but their
casual use of you still stings. For the thousandth time, you are reminded that when push comes to
shove, no one else will be there to fight your battles for you.

Perhaps it'll do you good, this distance. Let you hone your focus, devote yourself to the things you
cherish most. Burying any smoldering thoughts of Levi and your grudge against Erwin, you dive
into rediscovering yourself. *Redefining* yourself. Slicing off the suet and prioritizing only the
essence.

"Of course, sir."

Hiking back up to the barracks to change into uniform, you're assaulted by a wayward Sasha.
You're welcomed back warmly into the fold of your cohort; you're pleasantly surprised by how
much they missed you, and not just the usual suspects either. Even Bertolt and Ymir seem relieved
to see you in one piece; you know this because when they finally see you, their lips
incrementally shift up one degree, which you think is how they were taught to smile.

*Too* sweet.

At their sympathy about the raging *family medical emergency* you apparently just dealt with, you
almost feel guilty. You do your best to avoid the subject, figuring the less you have to actively lie,
the better; this silence flows nicely with Erwin's story about your absence, making the whole
situation seem too painful to talk about.

Salmony-pink and puckered, like a fish that's been ripped out of the water and left to dry, forgotten.
That's what you think it looks like anyways, the massive gash that runs up your right arm. It's not
without uses though, spurring you to train harder every day for the next few weeks. You might
have lost the power of your dominant arm, but you're pouring every volt of energy you have into
strengthening your left.

Aim. Strength. Flexibility. Learning to cut smooth, controlled arcs with your left 3DMG blade, much like you used to with your right. Jean and Reiner have been generous with you, patiently helping you rebuild yourself.

The universe works in fascinating ways, because it's when you've completely forgotten about the whole thing that it happens.

There's an odd tingling in the skin on the back of your neck, and giddy whispers ripples out around the room. Breaking away from Connie's gaze, you scan the Mess Hall and your stomach turns.

Squad Levi occupies a remote corner, and even though they're as far away from the center as one can get, their presence dominates the room. He's facing you, silver eyes roving around his table in turn as he mumbles into their elite huddle.

Lunch suddenly tastes horrible.

"Holy crap, they're back!" Connie exclaims, following your gaze. "That must mean we're due for another one soon."

Your eyes flick back to him. "Another expedition? Commander Erwin hasn't mentioned anything."

"Ballsy move, after the losses we suffered from the last one," Jean huffs, smooshing a cheek onto his fist. "It's hardly been a month."

Collecting your tray, you rise off the bench, ignoring Sasha's glare at your unfinished food. "Well then, we'd better get back to training," you mutter. "I'll be in the Shed if you guys want to join."

Only thing is that there is a problem.

The peculiar tingling in your neck won't go away, infecting your nerves with a blazing fire, and the source of this Walls-damned plague is none other than Captain Levi. Anytime it happens, you know he must be nearby. Sure enough, whenever it strikes, you'll find him around if you hunt hard enough, haunting your peripheral vision. Always facing your direction, but preoccupied with berating Oluo, or fiddling with a knife that he's swiped or thrashing around an unfortunate cadet.

Each time, you brush it off and force yourself to concentrate on whatever you're currently doing. It's only by accident that you catch it. Munching on an apple, you're trotting off to the training
grounds when the prickling starts and you turn to your left. There's the briefest flash of silver against the widening whites of his eyes. Before you can blink, he's returned his attention to the presence by his side, calmly speaking to Petra and it's over so soon you can't even reliably claim that it happened. Levi grants you a casual nod as they walk by, as if he's only just discovered that you are sharing the corridor with them.

...then they pass you, and that's that.

Rolling your eyes, you stalk down the hall and continue on your way.

You're trying to disentangle yourself from this mess you have found yourself in, honest, but it just won't leave you alone. The harder you pull away, the more vigorously the situation clamps down.

Exhausted but satisfied, you and Reiner are wiping down your 3DMG blades after a brutal afternoon of practice, when a certain ginger accosts you. Reiner nearly trips over himself with his clumsy advances; he'd do just about anything that sweet voice of hers asks, so when she requests a private audience with you, Reiner has little choice but to leave. The brawny blonde has a thing for the cutsey types, you note with a smirk.

The second Reiner's form disappears out of the Shed, Petra wastes absolutely no time, striking straight for the heart.

You suppose that boldness is what earned her a spot on the Special Operations Squad in the first place.

It's an ambush, and her question has the effect of a sledgehammer to a pane of glass.

"I've been wanting to speak with you for a while," she murmurs, extracting the blades from your grasp, cleaning them as meticulously as if they were hers. Those amber eyes never leave yours, however, even when she stoops down to unclip your blade holsters. "I hope you don't mind my asking, but what exactly is the nature of your relationship with Captain Levi?"

The large Shed suddenly seems oppressively small, and Petra's hushed words deafeningly loud. Even tucked between the dark alleys between equipment racks, you're too exposed, too alone. All your training in Mitras and the Corps alike haven't taught you how to face this particular kind of beast.

"H-he's someone I greatly r-respect," you say to the equipment racks, despising how your voice
"And I as well," she says with confidence. "In fact, he's very dear to my heart."

You blink at the equipment racks.

_Praise the Walls_, you want to tell her. This is such _wonderful_ news, you are absolutely titillated that she is involving you in her personal monologues. Trying to catch your eye, Petra leans forward as she returns your gear to its rightful place.

"He and I, we have an..._understanding_," she murmurs softly. "I hope you can appreciate where I'm going with this."

_He and I._

_An understanding._

They're _teammates_, partners, a power duo, and not just because of their shared presence on the Special Operations Squad. Your mind echoes Petra's question: What then, does that make you? Bile skyrockets up your throat and into your mouth, eyes threatening to water and you don't quite know what to do with your hands so you pretend to tighten your harness. Squint at a buckle in the hopes that the muscle motion will force the impending tears back into your ducts.

All of that _training_, all of that _focus_, gone in an instant. The work of weeks that you invested into reinventing yourself suddenly seem to crumble and disappear into nothing, like the dried mud castles you used to build in the summers, melting into the rain.

Petra says a couple of other things, of a lighter nature from the looks of her smile, but you hear none of it. Her unprovoked declaration is still cutting into you, boiling your skin like the harshest acid.

Knuckles stretched pale, you're still gripping the metal shelf long after Petra has parted ways with you. Dusk has fallen, coating the Shed in soft orange glow, and you have to peel yourself away from the equipment. It's utterly stupid to be this upset about it, because _obviously_ they spend a lot of time together and who can help but like Petra? Besides, you are proud and capable and in the Top Ten of the 104th and _he means nothing to you anyways._
No, no it's not Levi you're mourning, it's the sense that you were exploited. Taken advantage of. Played for a fool.

Like an anchor on your chest, the sullen thoughts dray you down to the depths of the earth, fill your stomach with lead so that (for the first time in your life!) you have no appetite.

With riotous clanging, an iron bell announces that the Mess Hall is open for supper, but you forgo it in favor of wandering the grounds. The harness stocks where you first tried on 3DMG, the grassy slopes where Jean snuck off to smoke, the now empty pen where you babysat Hange's dear children, anywhere your feet can carry you besides the Mess Hall. There, you avoid like its floor is made of blazing coals.

Yes, the distance will do you good.

"You can't eat Four-Eyes' shitty dead kids for dinner. Mess Hall's the other way."

What a lovely way with words he has. Truly a beautiful image to end the day on.

You spare him a curt nod, only as necessary, and mutter out a quick "not hungry".

"Tch, if you're not hungry then go to sleep," Levi orders, stepping closer in what you assume is an attempt to herd you back to the barracks. "Quit wasting time marching a shitty parade around the castle or whatever the fuck it is you're doing."

"Can't sleep," you reply firmly, deliberately stubborn as you sidestep him.

"Step one, lay your head on the pillow. Step two, shut your eyes. Even you can do it, runt," he assures you, dogging your every step.

How can he be so shameless? How in the sacred name of the Holy Walls does he have it in him to chat with you as if nothing happened?

Easy, your brain supplies. Because he thought nothing of it.

"Thank you for the detailed instructions, Captain," you say, voice sharp as a whip. "Sounds tough to follow, but I'll manage."

An iron grip snags your wrist, halting you in your feet, but you refuse to face him.

"Oy, are you still sore I jammed a needle in your neck?" he demands, patience wearing thin. "I told you, that was for your own good-"

"What about jamming your tongue in my... mouth?!" you snap. "Was that purely for my benefit, too?"
There's an oddly satisfying rush of wind from when he inhales, shocked. Suddenly, you decide you want to look at him, want him to see the ice in your eyes when you stare him down. Spinning on your heel, you tear your arm out of his grasp; he lets you, face growing paler. "Whatever you do your personal time is none of my business. But I would have appreciated being told where else you've dipped that filthy tongue of yours before touching me!" you hiss through clenched teeth.

He moves his mouth to speak, but you've heard more than enough, and override him.

"I can accept the exacting standards, the harsh punishments. I understand perfectly well that the military isn't a refuge for the faint of heart. Nevertheless, that being said, I will not abide being degraded."

He's watching you closely, quietly, silver eyes bolting between your eyes as if somehow he'll be able to eke out your thoughts. When he speaks, his tone is unnervingly sincere.

"What makes you think my objective was to degrade you?" he murmurs.

"No?" You purr, folding your arms across your chest. "Then enlighten me about your 'objective'."

You refuse to back down, not this time, and your unwavering conviction is enough to chase even the great Captain Levi's gaze back down to the ground, down to your feet. Levi is silent, working his jaw furiously. Curls and extends his fist.

Baleful silver eyes finally crawl up to meet yours.

"I was hungry."

...is he for real?

You're snarling before you even understand what you're saying, storming as far away from him as you can and you honestly don't even care what it is you are saying, because you are entirely out of fucks to give, every ounce of patience you have ever had has been greedily gulped down by this germaphobic Napoleon-

"(F/N)."

It's as rare as a blood moon, and just as beautiful, the sound of your name coated in his voice. It's totally foreign to you, and you're reminded of just how rarely he uses it. Mitras runt. Brat. Princess.

Never (F/N).
It stops you dead-cold, and you fight every instinct to turn around.

"(F/N)." There it is again, bolder this time. He wraps his tongue around the syllables like he's testing our the sound, pleasantly surprised at how it feels. You don't shrug the hand perched on your shoulder, hardly struggle when he turns you around to face him.

"I've...never done anything like that before," Levi mumbles to your boots. "It's not the kind of thing I routinely indulge in. My mission, my oath to the Corps takes priority over all else, but also because...this world is full of self-serving shitheads who make me sick."

Eyes narrowed, you mull this new information over. Where exactly is he going with this? "... and I am not among the shithead population, I take it?" You inquire.

Curious minds want to know. Levi affirms that indeed, you are not one of the shithead species he's apparently allergic to.

"Look, for what it's worth, I'm a virgin- stop fucking laughing Mitras runt, I'm serious- and I meant every word. I wouldn't have...not with just anyone... I never wanted your degradation... only..."

The words gush forward openly, courageous and vulnerable all at once. Levi is gesturing like these jerky hand motions of his will somehow help him explain, gaze flitting around yours as he searches for recognition. Unfortunately for him, you don't speak mime, and anyways he looks like he's about to have an aneurysm so you decide you're feeling merciful and put him out of his misery.

"I was just on my way to the stables," you say softly. "Wanna join?"

Levi is only too eager for a departure from the horrible world of feelings, falling into step beside you. You're about to enter the the stable of one of the stock horses, when Levi winds a hand around your forearm and tugs you forward. Levi maneuvers the two of you through the forest of stables, returning your incessant demands to know where you are going with silence.

Until you arrive at the last stable, tucked away in the furthest row. A familiar set of dark eyes come out to greet you. He's just as handsome as you remember, with his fine arced neck and lustrous black coat, gleaming in the moonlight.

"Black Beauty," you sigh blissfully, lifting the hatch and slipping inside.

There's a derisive snort from behind you.

"What kind of dumbass name is Black Beauty?" Levi demands, shutting the grate behind you. "He's a war-horse, not a fucking exotic dancer."
"Alright, well what do you call him?" you huff.

Tangling his fingers in a knotted ebony mane, Levi clucks in displeasure before procuring a comb off the rack. Fastidious with his horse as he is everything else, Levi sets to work brushing out the knots. "His name. Kenneth," he declares matter-of-factly.

"Oh that's so much better, making him sound like a creepy, possessed doll," you retort. "What kind of horse-parent curses their offspring with such a name?"

"One, it means 'born of fire', which appealed to me," Levi informs you. Edgy enough, you suppose you can understand. "Second, it's my uncle's full name. That's who he's named after."

Well crap. The only mention of Levi's family you've ever heard and you totally mocked him. Immediately, you stammer out an apology; Holy Walls, you didn't even know had an uncle, and obviously a revered uncle, if Levi named his steed, his partner in battle, after Uncle Kenneth's legacy.

"But you're not far off," Levi murmurs over your faltering apology. "Kenny bears a fucking uncanny resemblance to a possessed doll."

Jaw going slack, you stare at him, utterly discombobulated. You can't tell whether or not he actually likes his uncle who he named his precious horse after, totally unsure whether Levi's announcement was meant to be taken as a joke or a genuine observation. For his part, Levi is looking you straight in the eye, completely nonplussed as he continues brushing the stallion's mane.

So you compromise, letting out a strangled laugh- a sound that could just as easily be mistaken for you choking if you hide behind that excuse- and Levi nods, pleased with himself.

"Oy, you still feel like an insomniac?" Levi inquires, tossing you a carrot from a bin. "Give him a little feed. It's soothing shit."

Feeding Kenneth, you discover, is in fact soothing shit. After much hesitance, he makes his way over to your outstretched hand, deciding whether or not you can be trusted. Ultimately you pass Kenneth's test, and he makes short work of the carrot, whiskers dancing across your palm. You can't help the giggle that escapes, running your hand across an impossibly soft coat. It's painfully obvious the degree of care Levi has taken with his stallion. Even now, the Captain has his sleeves rolled, dragging in fresh bales of hay and shoveling out the mess from Kenneth's stable. You're so entranced with Kenneth's newfound, food-borne love of you that you don't notice when the sounds of the shovel die down.

Levi drops onto a bale with a sigh, leaning his weary spine against the stable wall as he quietly drinks in your smile.
This Doesn't Usually Happen is back baby! The story is still alive, I promise. Just lying in wait ;) Hoping to get out the next chapter or 2 within this week and the next. Overarching draft is there, just needs some tweaking. Thank you to everyone who has kept checking and not given up on this story <3 It was so touching to stumble across your comments weeks after the last update :) Hang in there!

Beware, SPOILERS in the chapters ahead! I haven't finished the manga (and won't be replicating it entirely either way) but just a heads up to anyone who hasn't gotten beyond the beginning and doesn't want it spoiled.

There are some additional pictures in the text, aside from the regular introductory pic. The map of the Walls is from Attack on Titan original material, and the excellently drawn battle formation was posted by MagicalBaconTree on this site:https://www.reddit.com/r/AoTRP/comments/6q72p1/summer_846_the_reclamations_beginning/ It appears to be an RP; I'm not familiar with it, but I just want to give proper credit to the creator.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"O' blessed be her name,
Guardian of horizons three,
From your grace, our hearts draw flame,
Burning with perpetual guarantee.
Let your virtue be our stone,
Your miracles our mortar,
Guiding us through lands unknown,
Into the lush embrace of the final arbor."

- Hymn to the Immaculate Lady of our Walls

You remember the words from long ago; so loudly and clearly do they rush through your mind that you need to glance around to make sure no one is actually humming them out loud. It's foolish, as well you know; after all, you're the only believer in the Church of the Walls here, aside for maybe Krista. But memory is a powerful thing, so all-encompassing an effect that it turns back time, whisking you to your childhood. It's almost as if you're still standing with a gaggle of ten-year-olds in the choir, shifting from foot to foot as you all warble in clashing octaves about grace and virtue and miracles to joyous parents in the pews.

But now you know better.

Nevertheless, the people of Karanes are believers, and above you the hymn still stands, carved into the stone arch of Karanes Gate. Even higher on the Gate, is a silhouette of Rose, the second daughter of the Immaculate Lady of our Walls and the emblem of middle Wall.

Or at least, what once was the middle Wall before the fall of Wall Maria. Now, you find yourselves as far east as the lands permit, in the furthest district of the only Wall remaining that stands between you and the Titans.
A few kilometers off the ground, you see soldiers mounted on the maintenance bridges on either side of the Gate, glaring down at you. Nobody pays them much heed besides you and Armin; in fact, despite the hordes of Survey Corps members around you, the air is pitch silent aside from the occasional stirring of the war horses. Soon, the Gate will roll open and you will leap forth into kilometers of uninterrupted Titan territory. For now, you wait. Naturally, everyone is far too consumed with final thoughts of their families before the 57th Expedition commences to pay attention to their surroundings much. *Almost* everyone- not you. It's all you can do to drink in every last detail around you; after all, who knows what will be the last thing you see?

If they *had* been paying attention, they may have noticed that the soldiers glaring down at you have jackets emblazoned with proud unicorns- *not* intertwined roses. Odd, considering the Military Police only sends its senior command to attend the Expedition send offs, and only as a formality-never *active* officers. It's the Garrison's job to secure the Walls prior to departure, which can only mean the MPs are here on another objective.

You and Armin exchange glances.

In the month since their defeat at the Military Tribunal, the MPs have all but severed contact with the remaining branches of the military and made their dislike of the Survey Corps known. Eren, the Titan Shifter, disappeared within the bowels of the base to train at who knows where; now that you think about it, you haven't seen him since your return from Mitras. Of course, that hasn't stopped the MPs from harassing you or your comrades about his location. Their recent obsession with the whereabouts of the Titan Shifter has been unnerving. More than once when returning from training or wandering off base, a fresh-faced Survey Corps recruit had been shoved into a dark alley and jostled around. Trailed back to the barracks by a horde of MPs. Had shopkeepers order you to leave because you were making other patrons uncomfortable.

It's sweet that they've come to greet you before the Expedition, but you're afraid you have the same answer.

No one knows were Eren is.

Hange tells them as much, when she shoves one of the glaring MPs out of her way and claps erratically from atop the maintenance bridge to the right of the Gate. "ATTENTION, SURVEY CORPS MEMBERS! THE 57th EXPEDITION BEYOND THE WALL TO CHART A COURSE TO SHIGANSHINA WILL BEGIN SHORTLY! ASSUME YOUR ASSIGNED POSITIONS!"

Time to test out Erwin's newest tactic, the *Long Distance Enemy Scouting Formation*- rolls right of the tongue. Fishing around your jacket pocket, hunting for your copy of the battle strategy:
The Survey Corps will essentially be divided into an arrow formation, with the arrowhead fanning out over a large expanse of territory. Soldiers on this outer front will serve as lookouts, firing a red flare when a Titan is spotted. Black flares are reserved for Abnormals and for Titans who manage to penetrate the formation. The neighboring Scout will see the flare and fire a corresponding one, and so on, to alert the Relay Team, located just inside the arrowhead, in two columns sandwiching the central column. The central column is made of Command and supply carts. Relayers will then deliver the message to Command, headed by Erwin, who will fire off a green flare indicating the new direction the formation should pursue to avoid Titans. For the most part, Scouts are comprised of whatever veterans remain in the Corps; newly minted privates are serving as Relay. Essentially, the formation will give your comrades the largest view of the land as possible- a giant eye to counter giant terrors.

Toeing the stirrup, you swing yourself onto your steed, guiding the both of you towards the Right Relay section, position 3-5. Huh, looks like you'll be close to Armin, Jean and Eren, per the initials scrawled under the nearby dots. Karanes Gate groans, drowning out the shouts of a small battalion of Garrison soldiers as they reel it open. Sunlight filters in as the Gate spits out soldier after soldier. A gust of crisp air cuts your cheeks, the freshest you have ever felt.

"Shiganshina, huh?" he mutters, and you turn to find Armin on his mount next you, looking wistfully at the sky. "That was my home once..."

"Just think," Jean chimes in, trotting up to you both. "If we really pull this off, reclaim Wall Maria, we'll be responsible for humanity's first true victory against the Titans!"

"May the Lady of the Walls guide us to victory," you declare, eyes never leaving the mount in front of you. "I know she won't abandon us!"
Jean and Armin say nothing. You take the opportunity to fuel up, reaching for the canteen inside your saddle bag. Instead of metal, however, your fingers brush across something strange, effortlessly silken. A lush ring of ice-blue petals peeks out from your saddle bag.

"Making sure we start off the mission right, huh Number 7?" Jean says, smirking as he eyes the small bouquet. To your confused stare, Armin clarifies.

"They're Asters," he explains. "Legend has it that our forefathers would burn the flowers to ward off evil. It's an old folklore, but people still do it here and there."

The flowers are damp against your hand, fresh. But before you have time to wonder how the protective blue blossoms somehow climbed into your saddlebag-

"SURVEY CORPS," Erwin roars, and a thousand voices fall silent, awaiting orders.

"ADVANCE!"

Thundering hooves pound on cobblestone, drowning out the chorus of bugles as Erwin leads the charge out. Energy surges through the crowd, infusing you with a frantic excitement as urge your stallion onwards, into the pristine, abandoned fields that once belonged to your people.

Blue petals leave a path after you, crumbling under a thousand hooves.

If you didn't know better, you'd say this was a trail ride.

In the five years since the lands of Wall Maria have lay forgotten, the wilderness has restated its claim. Jungles grow out of crumbling houses, wasps nest in abandoned letterboxes. There's a strange peace here, carried in the notes of the birdsongs. It's almost as if humanity was the alien presence here, rather than the victim being driven out.

From the laughter coming ahead, Corporal Carsten is entirely at ease; he's one of few the veterans that has been chosen to lead a Relay Team, rather than line the vanguard; this tells you he must be somewhat skilled if he's been entrusted to keep watch over petrified rookies like yourself. But if that the case, how can he be so calm at a time like this?

You knew the Long Distance Enemy Scouting Formation would, by virtue of being a detection system, be spread out; however, you didn't think that the next team ahead of you would look about the size of ants. Nor that next the team behind you would be eclipsed by the hills. There have been a couple shots fired here and there, but all red. All Normal. Still, far more Titan activity than you would have anticipated for this time of day, hardly an hour after sunrise. What's more, they all seem to be coming from further out right, from the West.

"Corporal sir!" you shout. "Permission to suggest a change of course to Command? There seems to be a ton of Titans flooding in from the right!"

He shoots down your proposal with a roll of his eyes. "No need to wet your pants yet rookie, we
haven't even seen a Titan," he ribs you, much to the delight of your team. "No word from Command, maintain current course."

As they continue laughing, you purse your lips and say nothing. Are they right? Are you just antsy because this is your first Expedition? Even if you are being anxious, you're at least trying to think strategically. There was no need to humiliate you.

"Hey (L/N), do me a favor, huh?" Corporal Carsten says, and you glance up to find a slightly kinder smile. "Have some faith in your comrades."

You return his smile, and affirm that you will. Watch him spur his steed ahead to guide you all onwards.

The second his back is towards you, you drop the facade. That gnawing unease just won't quit, regardless of whether your teammates can sense it too.

Four, inky columns of smoke reach into the clouds. Familiar tremors rock the ground, slamming against your ears and unnerving even the most hardened war horses. Corporal Carsten has only just fingered the flare-gun when it happens. You blinked, but it feels like you must have dozed off for hours.

By the time you open your eyes, it's all over. Fleshy limbs scuttle over blotches of red smeared across the ground. It hurtles towards you at breakneck speed.

You only register Carsten's scream after the fact.

**CENTIPEDE TITAN!**

Shrieking, you drive your heels into your whinnying horse, sprinting forward. Shit if it's broken this far into the formation, the right vanguard must be all but destroyed. That building dread from before returns full-force, bubbling up and Walls damn it all you hate being right! Corporal Carsten should have instructed you to alert Command! This entire formation relies on effective communication; what if Erwin hadn't even seen all the flares the right vanguard had desperately been firing? Given how large of an area the Corps is spread out across currently, those signals- that everyone's lives depend on- could have been missed this whole time!

The heat from its open maws sears your spine.

But what were you supposed to do, when Carsten shot down your suggestion? Break rank?!? Defy orders?
Globs of drool are showering on either side of you.

_You should have trusted your gut!_ If you had, _maybe_ they'd be angry with you, but more importantly, _maybe_ they'd still be alive!

Daring to peer over your shoulder, you find bulging, juicy eyes towering over you. Coming ever closer. You're a sitting duck here, galloping away in open fields without a single hook-hold in sight for your 3DMG. Even if you _did_ have something to hook into, there's no way you'd be able to vault back over Centipede Titan's head and get to it's nape in time-- not when it is mere heartbeats behind you and rapidly closing in.

It's only a matter of time.

"O' Lady of the Walls, grant mercy!"

Twin explosions ring out. Red bathes your vision. A boulder swats your horse and you go _flying_ and suddenly the world is a beautiful mess of colors. It comes up to greet you sooner than you think, dirt slamming into your side as pain _blooms_ across your back, and you're _tumbling_ for what seems like an eternity.

Ears ringing, you squint at his lips. Two fingers are hunting for the pulse at your neck, and a two-toned shock of hair rests on your chest.

"_(F/N), I said are you alright?" Jean demands, shaking you awake. "HEY (F/N), talk to me, you're fucking freaking me out-"
Moaning, you pull yourself up-- actually, it's Jean pulling you up, but you'll take credit for it anyways.

"Tall, Dark and Ugly tossed you like ragdoll," he mutters, dusting the grime off your uniform. "That was some quick thinking by the way, blinding it with the red flares. You hurt?"

Setting to to work, you take inventory of your wounds. Battered and bruised, but you can see, you can hear. Rolling your wrists, you test out your strength. Jog in place a bit. Eventually, you come to the conclusion that only your pride has been wounded by Jean stealing your kill. That and some residual dizziness.

Relieved, Jean gives you a saucy wink as he fetches his horse. "Swooning, eh? No worries, I have that effect on people."

Not even man-eating giants will crush that playboy spirit of his; truly outstanding resolve, you must admit! "I should probably steer clear of you then," you fire back with a smirk of your own. "Bye!"

"Actually, you should probably hold onto me very tightly," he says, surprising you with how grim he looks. Following his gaze, you spot a mangled brown mass in a pool of crimson. "Looks like your ride won't be carrying you much further."

You never even got a chance to name him. Climbing up his stallion, Jean extends a hand and pulls you into the saddle behind him. Wrapping your hands around him, you strategically avoid his waist; the back of his head might be blocking his expression, but you can positively feel the leer on his face. It's peculiar, resorting to high-school banter like this, when the two of you are about to ride off into an uncertain future amid an abandoned wasteland.

"Leave some room between us for the Lady, you pervert," he accuses, throwing a devilish grin over his shoulder. Blushing, you stammer an apology and slacken your grip- so busy drowning in thought you hadn't bothered to notice how tightly you were holding. "But seriously... look alive. This is unfamiliar terrain, with enemies that gargle humans when they're bored. Now's no time to fantazise about my impressive six-pack."

You offer a polite laugh, but even to your ears it sounds hollow. Grunting, Jean cinches his thighs around the stallion, propelling the two of you forward through the plains.

It's only then that the quiet fully dawns on you; the same right vanguard that has been fighting off an Abnormal onslaught all morning, has abruptly fallen silent.

Chapter End Notes
A tad bit short, but I'm hoping to squeeze in another chapter this week, and one the following week. Sit tight, my duckies; things are about to get messy!

...also what kind of psycho stalker sneaks Blue Asters into your saddlebag when you aren't looking? What a creep!
After a ruthless year-long training regimen, it's time to show us what you've got. Beyond the protection of the Holy Walls, lands are ruled by Titans not kings. With no shelters to flee to, and no safety-net to soften your mistakes, will you be able to survive the 57th Expedition?

And so begins the wrath of the Female Titan...

Get ready for a long, intense ride, my duckies *this* chapter's plot development will play a crucial role in the ultimate ending...hehe. Good luck, and remember your training, Private.
Kilometers of empty grasslands surround you, as far as the eye can see. As you and Jean cut a path across the plains, you realize that the birds are no longer chirping. Even the crisp morning breeze has died down, leaving the landscape eerily still.

Lifeless.

"I don't like this," Jean mutters. Did the two of you veer off course while distracted by the Centipede Titan? Miss a green flare that redirected the rest of the army, and got left behind?
You go blind.

Everything is plunged into darkness and you're blinking desperately, mind scrabbling to make sense of this sudden theft of your vision. Jean drives his heel into the horse, rocketing you to the side in seconds. Something massive slams into the ground you once occupied.

It's incredible and terrifying to behold. Tall enough to blot out the sun, nearly as tall as the Holy Walls, it stands, robbing you of daylight. The foot alone is as long as several carriages, and you can't help but gape at the heel that nearly crushed you. The heel that is no longer moving. The beast is considering you, head tilted to the side as blonde bangs shadow its eyes, so human-like a gesture that you almost forget this beast nearly killed you. It's then you notice a distinctly feminine body structure, lined with sleek yet powerful muscles. This is no ordinary Titan, and though you know it's useless, instinct drives you to reach for the black flare. Ripping his heels out of the stirrups, Jean leaps onto a crouch above the saddle.

"What're you doing?" You shout. "Keep moving!"

"We didn't even see it coming!" Jean shouts back. "No way we can outrun this thing!"

There's metallic whirring and he's gone, empty air in his place. With no time to waste, you sour the horse further out to the side, giving you room to watch Jean's shoot up the sky and alight on her shoulder. It very nearly kills him, the gargantuan hand that slaps across the nape of her neck. Your jaw drops. Perhaps she was only trying to reach her prey? There's...there's no way it was a deliberate attempt to protect her weak spot? Because that would suggest intelligence in a Titan!

Raising his blades, Jean sets to work on her fingers-

-only to be met with a shower of metallic shards. Glistening in the sunlight, a strange mound now covers her fingers, evidently strong enough to shatter your only possibility of survival- 3DMG blades.

"What the hell?! She can harden!" Jean roars.

Intelligence.

Panic courses through your veins. It would be foolish to dismiss this obvious display of strategy as anything else- which brings you to an even more nauseating epiphany: this is no mere Abnormal, but a human cloaked in a Titan's body. The Corps has been infiltrated by the most dangerous enemy, a killer who looks just like anyone else. How could you possibly have missed this?! If Eren is a Shifter, it only makes sense that the possibility can be extended to others! No, you're not going to be able to kill her; she knows to protect her nape and can harden at will. Haphazardly knotting your horse's reigns to a shrub, you set sights onto the back of her knee and catapult into the air. The only viable option is to slow her down. With Jean flitting about her shoulders, her legs are unguarded; sever the tendon, and you might just be able to immobilize her.

Boots slamming into the hard sinews behind her knee, you rush forward-

"(F/N) IT'S A TRAP!"
A shadow is growing over you; and your stomach drops in realization. She saw straight through your tactics.

"MOVE DAMNIT!"

She lured you to the back of her leg, waiting till you settled before snapping her ankle back to crush you against her thigh. In the space of a breath, muscles strong as rocks have crashed together, obliterating everything in between.

She misses you by nanoseconds. In the blink of an eye, you've retracted your hooks, fired into the opposite leg, as high you can aim. Heart thundering, you don't have time to catch your breath. Everything has plunged into chaos; shrieking, you don't even know where exactly you're going, darting around up her flank as her other arm chases after you. Dodging swatting fingers like you're no more than a fly. Jean seizes the opportunity to try and hack at her wrist, removing the hand still blocking her nape. Fruitless- she'll only harden again, then crush you both. If the Achilles tendon is no longer an option, you need another target. Next time her other hand comes for you, you welcome it. Leap on board and dart up her arm. Launch hooks into her neck and aim straight for those hideous blue eyes.

It's like an earthquake in midair, to a chorus of agonized yells. Suddenly, your vision is swimming, your body is swinging and you have no idea which way is up. You have seconds to process the whole thing. In a heartbeat, she has removed the hand that once blocked her nape, flinging a screaming Jean off her shoulder. Quick as bullet, that same hand has seized you by the cables, dangling you before enormous pair of eyes.


You didn't get to say goodbye to anyone, not even your horse, and now you and Jean will die alone out here, miserable and terrified out of your wits in your final moments. Brain whizzing through possibilities, you summon hundreds of faces, dissecting everyone you've ever met in the Corps. Who is it? Who has the audacity, the cruelty, to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you while reciting the Oath of the Survey Corps, and then slaughter you in cold blood?!

"DON'T LET THAT SUICIDAL MANIAC DIE IN VAIN!!"

Female Titan goes stock-still, her eyes never leaving yours. The new voice snaps you back to reality: way down below, you see a shock of golden hair on a short body, pounding his fist into the ground as he sobs.

"I WARNED HIM NOT TO GO IN THE RIGHT VANGUARD!! I TOLD HIM IT WAS SUICIDE! BUT THE SECOND HE HEARD THERE WERE TITANS HE TOOK OFF!!" Armin screeches.
Oh no, ohnoohnooho, what on earth is Armin rambling about? He's mad, there's no way humanity already lost its only advantage against the Titans, the Attack Titan-

"AVENGE EREN!! I SAW HER KILL HIM WITH MY OWN EYES!"

Unraveling everything you've ever been taught, the Female Titan remains motionless. Human prey only meters from her serrated teeth, and yet she makes no move for you. Keeps you suspended in midair, hanging by metal cables. There are shouts coming from below, but you can't hear them. Back and forth, back and forth you're still swinging in front of twin pools of sky-blue eyes. It's almost hypnotizing, and feels oddly familiar...

"Like I said, shit happens. Then what do you do?"

Hunted down by an unstoppable predator.

"Tell me, princess, what do you do when you're miles outside the Walls..."

Cornered and alone. Dangling to life by a thread.

"...deep in Titan territory..."

Vision consumed by icy, unforgettable gray-blue eyes.

"...and everything has gone to hell?"

So what do you do?

You're going to die; you know this much. Everybody dies. But by the three Holy Walls, if you're going to die, you're taking this murderer (with some voluptuous curves that are making you a tad bit self-conscious, if you're being honest) down with you. She stole the only true hope humanity had, endangered everyone you have ever known and Walls help you you're going to

Make.

Her.

Pay.

You only get one shot at this. You can't entrust this task to you're right arm, not after the second Advanced Exercise. Concentrating the power in your shoulder, you whip back and fling your left blade as hard as you possibly can.
Her skull jolts back and you go lurching to the side, but remain trapped in her grasp. If you were in a normal state of mind and dangling kilometers above the ground, you'd be petrified; instead you're cackling madly, delighted that your blade has gone straight for her pupil, burying itself to the hilt. Her other eye locks onto you, furious, and you know she's not going to let you get lucky again. Her wrist flicks, you can feel the tendons igniting into motion, but you refuse to give her the satisfaction. Before she can send you flying, you whip out your right blade and slice the cables off, dropping through the air.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, YOU PSYCHO--!!"

Frenzied shouts continue from below, more numerous than before, but you keep ignoring them. With the echo of that first Advanced Exercise, your muscles snap into place, whirling you around in midair. Without your hooks, your cables are useless-- but that doesn't mean your 3DMG has to be. Pumping out another set of blades, you slam one into the tough tissue of her chest and slide down her torso.

"If you have the energy to scream," you shout to the ground, "then make yourselves useful and take her out while her eye is out of commission!"

There's a thud next to you, and you never thought you'd be so happy to see Reiner. He'd always been a little too bro-y for your tastes, but crouched next to you on the abdomen of Female Titan, he couldn't be more welcome.

"Feisty, aren't you?" comes his booming voice. "Those were some killer moves, but don't get carried away, baby girl. You're out two hooks, and she's not gonna let you slide all the way down to the ground. I'll take care of the rest. Hey Kirschtein, incoming!"

Your heart soars at the discovery that Jean somehow is still alive, until you realize what Reiner means. Massive biceps wrap around your screaming form.

"DON'T THROW HER, YOU KNUCKLEHEAD, HOLYSHIT--" screeches Jean.

With a grunt, Reiner lobs you at Jean, who is rapidly scaling Female Titan's hip; he looks about the size of a thumb from this far up. How on earth will he ever make it in time? For a heart-stopping second, you're plummeting through air, sailing past columns of wiry muscle, until you knock the wind right out of Jean. Snarling in pain, he locks a vice-like grip around you and throws you over his shoulder before hurtling back down.

"YOU FREAKING MORON, if I hadn't shot those hooks last second she'd have been a goner-!"
Jean lets the sentence peter out at your devastated expression. "Oh fuck, don't tell me he's not behind us..."

You and Jean alight on the ground, where Armin stands with two horses. Reiner isn't so lucky; before your horrified eyes, the Female Titan crushes him into her fist.

"REINER!" You shriek, struggling to lunge forward. Jean presses you down onto his shoulder, hissing, "Forget it! We need to run!"

"The guy just saved my life!" You snap. "I'm not abandoning him! Cut her legs!"

"What are you going to save?" Jean argues. "You saw her CRUSH his entire body; he's probably already dead!"

"I agree with Jean, we need to alert Command," Armin insists. "The longer that's delayed, the more people will die."

Screaming blades devour Female Titan's fingers; Reiner erupts from her fist a savage roar. Fortunately, Armin had the foresight to ready the two horses left to your group. You clamber on after Jean; only seconds later, Reiner hits the ground running and leaps after Armin. By the time the Female Titan moves, the four of you are kilometers away, galloping down the plains. Glancing over your shoulder, you find that she has now started running away from you. You never thought you'd be remorseful to see her leave, but ugly dread is bubbling back up in your gut; Armin's expression seems to capture what you're currently feeling. That legendary destructive force, combined with impeccable focus, makes for an impossible enemy. If your hunch is correct and she is in fact a human piloting a Titan, then there must be purpose behind her actions, which begs the question: why is she suddenly moving in the opposite direction, when her only goal a few minutes ago was to annihilate you?

Reiner interrupts your inner monologue to share some deep thoughts of his own.

"Nice ass, that one."

Your savior though he may be, you do not have the energy for Reiner's hormones. "Reiner she slaughtered people in cold blood," you hiss. "She's a murderer!"

"A murderer with a nice ass," he points out, giving credit where credit is due.

"Nice ass or not, why the hell is she heading away from us?" Jean demands, echoing your fears.

"Because she's hunting a target," Armin mutters.

Hope surges through you. "W-who could she possibly be hunting, Armin?" you venture cautiously.

Instead, he dodges your question. "Where was Eren on your map of the formation, (F/N)?"

While your version recorded Eren's position as Right Relay, 2-4, Jean's has Right Relay 4-4. Reiner's has Left Relay, 3-2. As Armin had revealed to Reiner prior to encountering you,
the Female Titan is hunting Eren. The only thing that had halted the Female Titan's onslaught was Armin accusing her of murdering him.

"I made that up, and only to distract her from killing you," he shares. "but it confirmed my concerns, unfortunately. Command must have suspected that a Titan spy infiltrated the Corps, hence why they wrote a different location for Eren on everyone's individual maps. The true purpose of this mission isn't arriving at Shiganshina to find Dr. Yeager's basement; I believe Commander Erwin's real objective is luring out the Titan spy, while protecting our most important asset- Eren Yeager."

As the group mulls these revelations in silence, your heart sinks; if this is all true, and Female Titan has just changed direction, that means she must have realized the truth. Eren Yeager is located in the most secure part of the formation, guarded by the elite Special Ops Squad: central rear.

"Then s-shouldn't we go to central rear ourselves?" Jean asks, voice shaking. "If she actually manages to catch that punk, all of this will have been for nothing..."

"No," Armin responds firmly. "Even if that's true, we have no idea how much of the formation remains. We're operating on very limited information. Best we can do is continue southwest like we're supposed to be going, catch up to the group and hope (F/N)'s blow to the Female Titan's eye is enough to compromise her offensive capabilities."

As the conversation peters out, your group is submerged back into an oppressive quiet. The grassy plains around you remain as still as ever.

On the bright side, Armin was right on two of those counts. Continuing southwest put you right in the sights of some veteran scouts, guarding the Titan Forest. Your group is given stern instructions to take to the trees with the rest of the rookies and stand guard at the perimeter of the forest, slaying any Titans who try to breach it. Besides Command and the support wagons, no one is permitted to actually enter the forest. You're relieved to see all of the trainees from your cohort have made it alive, thus far; they're perched on thick branches of the immense evergreens, looking every bit as uncertain as you feel. Sasha, your beloved roommate, is delighted to see you, throwing her arms around you in massive hug and sobbing into your shoulders. She reveals how her assigned regiment had- much like yours- been utterly wiped out. Describes with unsettling familiarity the sheer terror of having to fend for herself, alone in Titan territory. Rather than the Female Titan, her group was mauled by a demon she calls the Jaw Titan. Wiry and small, impossibly fast, with claws and jaws that can obliterate just about anything. If you're ever unfortunate enough to encounter it, the last thing you'll see before you die are pair of yellowed, curling fangs.

While you two are exchanging horror stories, Sasha even manages to snag you an extra set of 3DMG to replace your useless cables.

Word of the Female Titan's terrifying might has spread like wildfire; those from the Left Relay column, fortunate enough to have missed her, press you for details. The veterans stationed on the perimeter are of no help. Aside from sharply ordering you to Return to your duties, private, the veterans provide no answer about the overarching plan. Even when a bout from cannon-fire echoes from the bowels of Titan Forest, they bark at you to focus on warding off Titans and ignore it. What concerns you, however, is the rising doubt in Commander Erwin's leadership.
Is he senile, abandoning the route to Shiganshina to lead the army to a **Titan Forest**?

Is he confused and desperate, haphazardly improvising after the massive losses we have suffered?

*Why doesn't the rest of Command do anything? Relieve him of power?*

As the whispers circulate in the trees, even Jean makes an offhand comment about a mutiny; you release a halfhearted laugh, uncertain whether he's actually joking. Suddenly, the forest releases an ungodly shriek, sending the tree trunks shuddering. You and Sasha exchange worried glances; you don't know of *any* weapon that makes that sound.

**Quiet.**

For a heartbeat, two.*Then*, from all directions, a horrible and all too recognizable noise begins. A deep, steady and throbbing rumble, like the pounding drums of war or ferocious roar of thunder. It shakes your bones in your skin, thrums through the trees to their roots, chases the birds out of their nests. From every direction they emerge, a howling avalanche of Titans. Faster than your eyes can process, they descend upon the forest, ignoring all the human bait and sprinting to the center.

Bursting from the treeline, Sergeant Nanaba of Squad Mike suddenly lands at the perimeter, screaming, *"All ranks, head to the interior of Titan Forest immediately! DEFEND THE FEMALE TITAN AT ALL COSTS!"*

You have no time to ponder these instructions. Muscles snap into action before any of you can think, and you launch into the shadowed depths of the forest. Coursing through the trees with a single objective in mind, you barely feel the branches cutting into your cheeks. As the clearing up ahead comes into view, Nanaba's orders finally register.

Pierced a thousand times over by a dense mesh of grappling hooks, stands the Female Titan. At first glance, you swell up with pride; you were *right* to keep your faith in Commander Erwin! Even with viciously unpredictable twists that this expedition took, he masterminded a plan to secure victory over the Titans! The scourge that decimated the Right Vanguard now stands absolutely defenseless! What's more, she failed to abduct Eren!

Surging with pride, you dive into the fray. Hands thrown across her nape, Female Titan releases another ungodly shriek; her minions heed the call. Rushing like a river below you is an endless line of Titans, pouring in one after the other as they scramble to get to their beacon. Instead of supporting her, they *tear* into her, devouring her form bit by bit. If she cannot win, then the traitor hiding within the Female Titan would sooner die than reveal her secrets.

**Coward!** you think, snarling. *Should have thought long and hard before stabbing us in the back!*

Titan Forest collapses into a whirlwind of chaos. Vets are barking orders over the nauseating sound of fangs tearing into flesh. All 3 Elite Squads take their place in the center of it all, darting about Female Titan's body in a blur of blades. Erwin surveys the mess from higher up in the trees, Eren by his side. While the best of the best are *naturally* going to be exceptional slayers, it's Petra and Oluo who draw your eye. The pair moves with striking grace, an unspoken synchrony that devastates your enemies. Their deadly dance through the branches leaves only sizzling remains of
Titan bone as evidence.

Well, you can't let these old geezers have all the fun. Nevertheless, you and your fellow privates lack the finesse of your more seasoned counterparts; if you're not careful, you'll easily be caught in friendly fire.

"Hey everyone! Privates!!" you screech. "Buddy up and take down Titans in pairs! If you've got one, call dibs so the rest of us know!"

Teaming up with Sasha, you set to work on the tallest Titans surrounding the Female. Because you're diving down from the canopy, their napes are the most exposed to you, and therefore, the safest targets. The two of you take turns slaying, dispatching 5 between you. Jean and Armin follow suit, with Bertolt and Reiner trailing closely behind. Mikasa and Connie are a little more daring, dipping even lower to the shorter Titans and egging the rest of you on.

"It's actually starting to clear up!" Sasha chirps. "You wanna try the lower ones?"

"Come on in, losers the water's fine!" Connie mocks from down below, zipping about the middle-height Titans with surprising ease. He and Mikasa make a decent pair.

"Don't get cocky, melon-head!" Jean snaps, slicing through fresh nape. "All it takes is the blink of an eye!"

Since most of the remainder of the rookies choose to stay in the safety of the canopy, you and Sasha agree to venture lower with Mikasa and Connie. You've got to be more vigilant down here. The further you descend beneath the canopy, the less sunlight is able to penetrate the leaves. Humidity builds up beneath your uniform, coating your skin with sweat. It's early February, but it might as well be July; the Female Titan is actively disintegrating as Titans feast on her, releasing scorching plumes of steam. The smokescreen makes it difficult to see, and the unbearable heat weighs you down.

Here, deeper in the forest, it's darker, more dangerous and far easier to fall prey to a Titan.

Edging your way forward, you gradually slice your way to the center of the battle. Deep within the fray, the four of you are now closer to the Elite Squads. With your backs to the Female Titan, you radiate out in a flurry of blades to destroy her minions.

She screams.

If you have to choose, you think this is the exact moment everything went to hell.

Panic is blooming around you and you don't know why. The Elite Squads are frenzied, and you strain to hear them over the maddening din surrounding you. You know the scream; you haven't heard exactly heard this voice in so much agony before, but the tone is familiar enough to seize your interest.
A furry blur has broken through the fray, piercing into the core of the battle. Furious teeth of smashed through Petra's blades and blade holsters. Other members of the Elite Squad have suffered similar fates, leaving them defenseless. It's the fastest creature—fastest anything—you've ever seen. One by one this berserker has targeted and declawed the best slayers you have; without their gear, they are absolutely defenseless.

Well, this is new. 3DMG is designed with some of the strongest material known to mankind; the only thing you've seen shatter a blade before is Female Titan hardening her skin—but never a mere Titan's teeth. Another daunting realization hits you: its behavior is targeted and deliberate.

It must be some mistake! Holy Walls is everyone and their mother a Shifter now?

"That's the one!" Sasha shouts. "That's the Jaw Titan! IT'S BACK!"

With a fearsome roar, it turns on you. One second, it's a few meters from you; the next, a hook-nose, bug-eyes and wiry black hair consume your vision. With a grunt, you fire off hooks just in time, shooting into the Female Titan's other hip. By the time you land, the Jaw Titan has lost interest, clambering back where it came from.

It takes about the blink of an eye.

Razor sharp talons sever Sasha's cables, cutting into the meat of her arm in the process. Jaw Titan flings her down Female Titan's thigh, taking care to also shove a heel into Petra's chest. Screaming, the elite ginger slayer topples backwards, arms pinwheeling as she drops through the sky, helpless.

As you watch the horrifying fallout, the battle slows down around you, crawling through the seconds.

The truth of this world is that everything comes in a limited supply: time, resources, life. The strongest wolves are able to feed on the sheep and live another winter. The weakest of the pack are too slow to catch a meal, don't make the cut and perish. Nature is a cruel mistress, playing favorites this way.

You, too, are cruel.

In the split second after Jaw Titan's dizzying blitz, you must make a decision. The most cold-blooded choice of all: from this distance, with your skill-level, you can only save one. Do you
rescue your best friend and beloved roommate, Sasha? The person who has been with you through thick and thin?

Or Petra, the Spec Ops Sergeant with a Titan kill count second only to Levi and Erwin?

Even worse, are you using saving Sasha as an excuse to get rid of your rival for Captain Levi's attention?

You don't know why you look, but you suppose it's the least you can do. To allow the sting of betrayal in those honeyed eyes follow you as they plummet through the forest.

Even in the middle of this chaos, you swear you can hear Sasha's body finally thud against the ground. The sound rings out like a thousand curses upon your name. Wrapping your arms around Petra's middle, you sail back up to the canopy in dead-silence. Gaping, Petra is staring deliberately at you, but you ignore her through the journey. It's when you land back up in the trees that she positions herself right in front of you.

"Y-you saved me, over your friend," she murmurs, in surprise.

"Over Sasha," you correct, voice sharp as a whip, still refusing to meet her gaze. Yours was the rational choice, the strategic choice, you keep telling yourself. The choice that will ensure the survival of the Corps. A newly minted Private versus a seasoned- and dare you admit, talented- combat veteran? No competition.

And no amount of reasoning will quell the tears pricking your eyes. She tries to lay a gentle hand on your shoulder but you shrug her off, snarling.

"T-thank you, (F/N)," Petra responds shakily. "Private (F/N)."

You really wish she'd stop staring at you this way, like you're one of Hange's freak Titan experiments. A pregnant silence hangs in the air between you; it's obvious that she wants to say something else, something hidden beneath the depths of this conversation.

"All hands withdraw! Await at the perimeter of the forest!" Erwin booms.

Eren is no longer by his side, you notice.

With a whoosh, Levi slams down onto the branch above you. It's only then you realize you haven't seen him the entire expedition, haven't yet had the treat of admiring his skill. "Petra, with me, now," he commands.

"C-captain!" she squeaks. "My gear, you see, it's been compro-"
A searing gaze makes quick work of the situation. "(L/N), hand her your gear."

Sacrificing your gear and the life of your best friend? Do they want a blood pact, while they're at it? Indignation fires through you; why should you have to give up your gear, over another rookie? "We're meters above the ground," you argue, "How am I supposed to get dow-"

Clicking his tongue at your protest, Levi flags Reiner down. Orders him to carry her majesty out to the perimeter before demanding you relinquish your gear to Petra immediately. Scowling, you slip off the holsters, yielding your equipment to an embarrassed Petra bit by stubborn bit. Reiner also has the decency to look awkward, asking you in a stammer whether you'd prefer to be carried bridal-style or piggy back.

Everyone around you is listening just a little too intently for your response to this question. Arms crossed over his chest, Levi looks bored as ever, but by now you've learned to catch the sharp gleam of interest in those frost-blue eyes of his.

He waits for you to climb onto Reiner's back before departing with his fellow elite slayer.

By the time you are granted a moment to collect your thoughts, the full moon douses the wastelands with an icy silver glow. The campfires have long since been put out, although the scent of burning meat lingers in the air. Aside from the veterans keeping watch, you're the only one awake. You're not supposed to be up, but what else is new?

The Survey Corps did not return to Karanes District, didn't trek back to the safety of the Walls. In fact, for the first time in the history of mankind, the Survey Corps is ordered to camp in the land outside the Walls, only a few meters from Titan Forest. Such a revolutionary decision was not without controversy of course; after the brutal events of the day, numerous soldiers threatened mutiny. Declared they would go back to the Walls with or without their Commander. It took the combined might of Mike, Hange and Levi to intimidate any defectors into submission; nevertheless, the resentment brewing is palpable.

It's a tactical gamble on Erwin's part, and one that might be suicidal. After mulling today's events, however, you think you can spot a method to his madness.

With the Survey Corps distracted and desperate to salvage a disintegrating Female Titan, the opportunity arose for Jaw Titan to strike. After targeting and negating the Elite Squads' equipment, Jaw Titan abducted Eren, the only possible antidote to extinction that mankind has. Like a jackal stealing from the lion's kill, Jaw Titan emerged from the shadows to pilfer the Female Titan's prized target. Within seconds, Levi assembled his Squad. Declared his orders.

They took to the trees in perfect unison. Whipped through the air at breakneck speed, blades blazing.
Only to be ambushed and brutally murdered by a *regenerated* Female Titan.

One.

By.

One.

Gunther was snapped in half. Eld decapitated. Petra crushed into the base of a tree. Oluo flung through the air. In a handful of minutes, the most celebrated warrior Squad in the history of the Survey Corps was reduced to dust and bone. The most painful decision you have ever had to make, leaving Sasha to die in order to save Petra, ended up being entirely *meaningless*. By sunset, the famed ginger warrior had been killed anyways. Would have been just as dead had you instead chosen Sasha. With the Spec Ops Squad decimated and Eren lost to the clutches of the enemy, Mikasa broke rank. Together with Levi, they barely managed to recover a badly injured Eren. Female Titan and Jaw Titan, unfortunately, evaded capture.

With the culprits operating Female Titan and Jaw Titan still on the loose, and a good quarter of the Survey Corps dead, Commander Erwin ordered his troops to set up camp. You know exactly what he's doing. After suffering such massive losses, the Survey Corps can't simply return to Wall Rose empty-handed. It would be unthinkable; with the political tide already against it, thanks to the MPs, the Corps would lose all of its funding. There would never be another expedition beyond the Walls, and the Titans would slowly but surely bring about the end of mankind.

The only option remaining, *as insane as it is*, is to smoke out the Titan traitors. To force their hand. Obviously, they are after Eren, and *obviously* he's still here. What better time to strike than when the Corps is defenseless, camping at night in Titan territory? With only a handful of weary veterans posted as guards? It's only a minor comfort, *if any*, that Ace of the Survey Corps Eren Yeager is tucked all the way in the center of the encampment with the rest of Command's tents. As if that will be sufficient protection.

Oh, you know what Erwin's doing alright. You just don't think the rest of the Corps will be able see and content themselves with it too.

It's time you pay a visit to Mikasa; at this point, you know she's one of the few people who have Eren's best interests at heart. Ergo, she's one of the few people you can actually trust. Stretching out your back, you stand to your feet, remaining in the shadow of the tent. While looking as feeble as possible, you have been subtly monitoring the guards for the last few hours. Shift change is soon, and you'll only have a precious few minutes to put your plan in action.

"You're certain?" Mikasa whispers. Despite her stoic face, she's listening to you with baited breath, both mesmerized and disturbed by your gall. "That's one hell of an accusation."

"Positive," you hiss. "The fighting tactics match their behavior from the Third Advanced Exercise *to a tee."

"And you think this will work?" she scoffs.
"It worked on me," you retort.

Under the cover of night, the two of you thread your way through the maze of tents, pausing every so often to ensure the guards aren't looking. At long last, you arrive to the right tent. Given that it's your plan, Mikasa has no qualms about staring at you pointedly until you decide to kickstart the scheme. Sending you to the lion's den alone.

Slipping past the flap, you allow your eyes to adjust a moment. Chest rising and falling, she's still asleep. Gulpings, you crawl forward.

Cautious and delicate, you move as though crossing the thin cap of ice covering a lake in winter. Millimeter by millimeter, you lift your palm, then delicately press it into the ground. Knees next, taking care not to let the rough canvas **CRUNCH** under your limbs. Hold your breath. Keep your heart rate steady.

It's too dark to see in here, but you swear you can see it glisten.

It being the syringe chock-full of sedative you stole from Hange's medical kits.

You're practically looming over her now. Passed over feet, crossed over the mountains of her knees and now your at her torso. *So close.* A heartbeat more, and you've finally arrived at your destination, the throbbing pulse dancing on a porcelain neck.

A blur of motion, then sharp **bone-crushing** pain.

The jumping pulse really should have been your first clue; slumbering people have *slower* heart rates. Unraveling herself from her covers, she moves to sit up, keeping your wrist locked in that vice-like grip. Blonde bangs fall out of sky-blue eyes.

"What have you got there, *friend?*" Annie asks, voice soft as ever. Completely devoid of the grogginess after sleep.

"J-just a diuretic," you grind out, wincing. "It was going to make you pee yourself while you slept. Just a little practical joke; Thought it would lighten the mood."

"That doesn't seem very funny," she murmurs. Slowly, she applies *even more* pressure, forcing
your wrist back and causing you to yelp in pain. Far, further then *unnaturally* far, until you can't help but bow down in the same direction to avoid it being broken. "But since you like laughs so much, why don't we make you the clown?"

Like rubber, her leg snaps up, ramming you right in the chest. With a whoosh, the strike steals the air from your lungs. The force of the blow sends you careening through the air, right out the flaps of the tent, slamming onto the dirt outside. Wind knocked out of you, you dissolve into a coughing fit, pathetically sprawled onto the ground.

Rolling the kink out of her neck, Annie stalks out after you, eyes trained on her prey. "What a shame, (F/N). I thought we could be **real** friends."

Oxygen-deprived or not, you refuse to let this slide. "R-real friends don't try to murder you and everyone you know!" you snarl.

Cocking her head to the side in that birdlike way of hers, Annie surveys you. Really takes you in. "'Murder'? That's a strong word, for someone who knows **nothing**-" she hisses, driving her heel into your gut, "of the crimes her people have committed. The filth they have brought into this world!"

"That's not-!"

Your protests are severed by a heel darting up to your neck, sliding into the crevice under your jaw.

"Though, honestly, I don't know what I expected," she says thoughtfully, while crushing your windpipe. "From some bitch who let her **supposed** best friend fall to her death. Without so much as batting an eye."

Tears well up in your eyes, and not because of the lack of air. Your nails dig into her ankle and you hiss at her to shut the hell up.

"What was that?" Annie murmurs. "Can't quite hear you from up here. Although..."

In a flash, she's dropped to her haunches, striking blue eyes disturbingly close to your face. Her thumb inches to her jaw. Lips pull back into a delirious smile, revealing a waiting canine."If you think me such a monster, then perhaps I should show you, show this entire camp, the **true power of the Female Titan.**"

Unfortunately, that show of power will have to wait. Because Mikasa finally emerges from hiding. She slams a burlap bag over Annie's head, cutting her off from her ability to bite her thumb.

"C-can't turn into your little monster without blood sacrifice, can you?" you sneer, pulling yourself up to your feet. Exchanging victorious smirks with Mikasa.
Except Annie isn't scrabbling at the neck of the bag. Isn't thrashing around. In fact, she doesn't look the least bit surprised. Shoulders slouched, knees bent, she is the epitome of calm.

"Sacrifice is the easiest part," she replies, voice velvety smooth. "Comes in many different forms."

You and Mikasa catch the twitch in her finger simultaneously. All you have time to do is stare at each other in horror, watching as Annie flips the switch in her golden ring. It produces a hidden thorn, easy to miss, that slices into the flesh of her middle finger. Draws out a thick bead of crimson.

Lightning erupts, barreling out from Annie's form and crackling up to the midnight sky. The explosion slams you and Mikasa back, throwing you around like you were made of paper. Like bars of a prison, enormous columns of ribs stretch out, cloistering Annie within. Hefty muscles wrap around the bone, and within seconds she will be too powerful to take on. Within seconds, strong enough to take what she wants and crush you all like bugs just for the hell of it.

Luckily, seconds are all the time he needs.

Like a shadow, he moves, quick and silent. Slips in from behind, darting around the partially formed spine of Female Titan. Lifts the syringe and buries it into her jugular vein. With a gasp, Annie whirls around, meeting harrowed silvery eyes.

"Would you feel the same, I wonder," Levi hisses, "when I sacrifice you?"

Annie still gets the last laugh, of all the rotten luck. With exceptional control over her Titan abilities, she ekes out her last bit of consciousness to harden, encasing herself in a crystal tomb. The entire camp has been rallied awake (so much for sleep) frenzied, delighted and in awe of Erwin.

"Although we march back with half our numbers," Commander Erwin declared. "We won't march back empty-handed. Hold your heads high, fellow soldiers! Let the sacrifice of your brethren buoy your spirits! The laughs of our detractors fall silent now, in the wake of our victory! For tonight, through your unwavering dedication, the Survey Corps has delivered a historic blow to its enemies! You have shown, in no uncertain terms, that we will not stand idly by through the oppression of mankind! That we will not be broken!"

The turnaround in morale is amazing to behold; from threats of insurrection only hours before, to renewed pledges of diehard loyalty to Commander Erwin. Cheers break out over rekindled campfires and Squad Leaders need to remind everyone to kindly shut the hell up as we are still in Titan territory. Even the Squad Leaders seem more lenient though, given the reduced Titan activity during nighttime. As the merry crowds break bread and joke around, you find your way to the outer corners of the camp. Collapsing against a supply crate, you allow yourself to slump to the ground. Release a breath you didn't know you had been holding. Shut your eyes for a rest.

An annoying toe nudges your thigh.
"You look like shit."

For once, you might be willing to admit that Captain Germaphobe is right. Bruised, battered and exhausted, you certainly must be a sight. Dirt cakes your skin. Your uniform is tattered, colors dulled with grime and blood. You can feel twigs braided deep into your hair. Beautiful, in other words.

Of course, you can't exactly tell him you agree, because his ego is already insufferably large. "Oh?" you sing-song, flipping your hair. "You don't like my new lewk?"

The humor falls flat on him, like howling wind breaking against an immoveable mountain. "Why are you making jokes at a time like this?" he demands. "You don't look happy."

Simple. Clean. And so very brutally efficient. Enough to finally get you to meet his gaze. Enough to trigger memories of glistening honey eyes, getting smaller as she slips further into the dark depths of the woods. You don't realize you're crying until he's crouched next to you, dabbing at your eyes with a pristine handkerchief.

"That's better," he murmurs, polishing your cheeks as delicately as if they were tarnished silver. "Now what has my Mitras runt so upset?"

It's so peculiar, how he behaves when he's out of his element, when he's away from the immediate responsibilities of the Corps. No growled orders. No ruthless punishments. He's soft. Patient. ..Tender even?

"I killed my best friend," you sob, burying your shame in your hands. "I let her, watched her, watched Sasha fall to her death! What sorry excuse of a friend am I?"

Gingerly, Levi peels apart your hands, exposing your tear-stained face to the moonlight.

"Y-you should have seen how she l-looked at me, Levi!" you wail, forgetting his title in your sorrow. "So full of hurt! So betrayed! And I could have stopped her! Instead, I-!" Immediately, you bite your tongue before you say anything else. Petra is-was- Levi's squad-mate; more over, they were obviously close. You won't speak ill of the dead, no matter how much you blame her.

"Do you regret saving Petra?" he murmurs, thumbs tracing the ridge of your knuckles. "Be honest with yourself."

Cheeks flushing, you're ashamed your cruel inner thoughts are so apparent to him. "It's just that... she died anyways," you mutter. "My sacrifice meant nothing."

Calloused hands have swallowed yours now, eagerly drowning them in his warmth. He cages your hands inside his, almost painfully, as if that will somehow protect you from the outside world. Wisps of dark hair tickle your forehead. "You chose to save Petra, over Sasha. You don't even known Petra. So tell me, why? You, of all people, would have had a good reason."

"Utility, I guess," you mumble. Your cheeks are pink again, but for an entirely different reason now. You keep your gaze fixed onto the distant glow of the fire pits. "I prioritized Petra's ability to kill Titans over my love for Sasha."
"...and you think that means nothing?" Levi whispers. Their color gets you every time. A piercing, clear, silvery-blue, like an untouched stream hidden away in the mountains. You wonder if he realizes just how close he is; if others returning from the celebrations will find you two like this. "In my lifetime, I've known only a handful of people who can make the choice you did. Who will put the survival of the group over personal interest. If my Squad-" his voice hitches the slightest bit, but you catch it "-hadn't been killed by that crazy bitch, Erwin wouldn't have been able to justify keeping the Corps camped outside the Walls overnight. Without that Sasha's death as a trigger, you wouldn't have been motivated enough to smoke out the Female Titan. The Survey Corps would have returned home, defeated, like a pack of dogs with their tails between their legs."

Careful fingers clutch your chin, turning your gaze to meet his own. "If you really want to honor Sasha's memory," he murmurs, "then make her and your sacrifices count."

There he remains, a statue for a few seconds more, while he appears to be scrutinizing the details of your face. Suddenly, his gaze darts to the side; it's then you catch the sound. Leather smacking against the dirt, a group of boots are slipping into view. Relinquishing hold of your chin, Levi rises to his feet. Assessing the newcomers over his shoulder, he keeps his chest facing you.

"Heyyy it's the Female Titan slayer!" crows a delighted veteran. "Whatcha gonna do with her boss? Gonna slice her up real nice?"

"Come celebrate with us, Cap'n!" slurs another.

Levi tolerates their attention. Knowing how important it is to keep morale up, he exchanges pleasantries. You wait for a bit, but this is quickly evolving into a conversation that you don't really have a part in; quietly, you make to move-

Ice-blue eyes flick towards you. You had made the subtlest motion, only the slight bend in your knee before standing, but nothing seems to escape that gaze of his. "Enjoy the night, fellas," grunts Levi. "I've got some business to take care of."

With that, he lifts you to your feet. Marches you all the way back to the tent you share with Krista. Ushers you inside. Waits silently outside until you sheepishly pop your head out in a failed escape attempt.

"Get some rest, Mitras brat," Levi orders. "Lenz, kick her ass if she doesn't."

"Aye-aye, Captain!" the traitorous Krista chirps, saluting.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

It's strange just how quiet, how still, an entire army can be.

War horses outnumber the soldiers now, so much so that some rookies' only job is herding the extra mounts. An endless river of empty saddles threads its way through the rolling grasslands, floating back to civilization. Sooner than you would have liked, the ecstasy from the Female Titan's defeat has bubbled and fizzed out, leaving behind the devastating toll of her onslaught, glaring and impossible to avoid. You've lost track of where the rest of your cohort are in the caravan, dispersed among the dregs.

You're not even facing the rest of them, flopping about on the back of a supply cart. Horseback riding was once your most cherished consolation; now, it serves only as a reminder of just how many of you are missing. Noontime sun beating down against your forehead, you instead watch the retreating hills and withering villages, the only sign that humans ever lived here. Ever diligent, the wheels on this thing don't miss a single crevice in the ground, thrashing you around too frequently to catch a nap. While awake, you try and put yourself to good use, slapping away at the flies swarming the white shrouds next to you. A whining buzz fills your ears and you hiss, struggling to protect the fallen as best you can. This campaign against the flies is quickly becoming a war of attrition, a war that you're doomed to lose; no matter how many you swat away, more beady, dark bodies come to replace them. They're just as numerous, persistent and revolting creatures as the Titans who snuffed out the silent figures lying beside you.

Again, amber eyes haunt your mind, an incessant waking nightmare. Your fingers are itching to throw back the cloth, to expose their faces, to see who among them you knew personally. Then again, she might not even be here. She could be kilometers behind you, languishing on a bed of fallen leaves, in the shadows of the Titan Forest. Dazed and exhausted in the aftermath, you're ashamed to admit that you hadn't bothered to check and see if her body had been recovered;
certainly, many soldiers had not been. Cavalry veterans had outright screamed at Hange, surging in her face and demanding the right to collect the bodies of their dead.

"I see the Special Ops Squad is all accounted for!" Dieter, a veteran had snarled, as the rest of you packed up camp. "Or is it only the elites that you care about? You're no better than the MPs!"

Hange, at the very least, had the decency to admit that he was right; that it wasn't fair that slain elite soldiers had immediately been collected by eagle-eyed Scouts. Funeral rites of the Special Ops Squad, among the other exceptional soldiers, had been prioritized over the common foot soldiers-no matter that their outcome had all been the same. That they had all met their demise fighting monsters, surrendering their lives for the good of a humanity that had mocked and ridiculed their mission.

Which is exactly why the request tears your world asunder. It happens in the span of a nanosecond, exactly how you were taught it would happen during the advanced exercises. One moment you're bouncing around in the back of a rickety supply cart, being dragged by weary stallions at the rear of the convoy. Prisoner of the flies. The next, gravity is ripped from under you.

Flying across the cart, you claw the side in a desperate fight to keep your world upright. Panicked, the horses bolt, lurching you forward at breakneck speed. You can barely hear the growing shouts over the wind rushing through your ears.

You really should have been paying attention; he'd had the right approach to this mess, the Captain. No mission is over, no matter how serene things appear, until you're safely back at base. You were being too indulgent, wallowing in nostalgia. Allowing your mind to wander. Self-pity is a luxury a Survey Corps soldier can't afford.

"W-WHAT?" you holler back at the cart driver. Milo, you think his name is. A transplant from the Garrison- or at least that's as much as you gathered from his meandering stories before locking yourself in your thoughts.

"THOSE IDIOTS ARE GOING TO KILL US ALL!" he screeches, digging his heels into the yelping warhorses. Wheels slamming into a rock, the cart gives a nauseating groan and careens into the air. "FASTER, USELESS BEASTS!"

The cart slams back down with a vengeance, shuddering violently as metal bars struggle to keep the wooden panels together.

"CAREFUL!" you snap. "It'll break apart!"

"Careful?!" he snorts in disbelief. "Where were you when those fuckwads went rogue?"
Hooking your legs around a cannon muzzle to ground yourself, you glance over your shoulder. You recognize him immediately, the veteran that launched a riot for Command's refusal to spend time hunting for the remains of common soldiers. Shaggy blonde hair bobbing up and down, Dieter is galloping desperately behind you, a body thrown across his saddle in front of him. Another soldier, likely his co-conspirator, struggles next to him, spurring on a horse that looks like it's going to collapse any second.

This all plays out only meters in front of cavernous jaws.

_Several_ cavernous jaws. Impossible, the supply carts were supposed to bring up the rear, meters beyond everyone else. How did two lone soldiers fall so far behind?

"They broke formation," snarls Milo, as frenzied shouts of panicked soldiers grow into a deafening chorus. "And now their selfishness _will kill whoever's left of us_!"

The ground thunders as though the earth is breaking open, leaving you screaming as you hold on for dear life. Fury and terror fight for control of your senses. You can't believe their idiocy, their loyalty, _their selfishness_. Most of all, you can't believe you trusted exhausted, traumatized soldiers to comply with Hange's orders, heartless though they may seem. The culprits, Dieter and Jurgen, had slipped away from the convoy, sneaking back into the Titan Forest to retrieve the body of their friend. Noble intentions, to be sure.

_Ones that hadn't gone unnoticed_. The Survey Corps' fallen wasn't all they had brought back with them. Closing in on the tail of this massive military convoy are three fifteen-meter class Abnormals. Limbs askew, they're tumbling over each other just to get a taste of you. Heart plunging down to your feet, you take a quick look around you. Hundreds of distressed warhorses, mounted by fatigued, hungry soldiers. Gas stores depleted. Equipment in dire need of maintenance. Broken bones and missing limbs and weeping wounds abound. Caught in the middle of these open grasslands, there isn't even a decent tree in sight to sink your 3DMG hooks onto.

By the time you have completed your dismal assessment, Dieter and Jurgen are already dead; silenced within seconds. There are no more complaints about leaving their fallen comrade behind, now as they join him.

This is becoming a familiar feeling: growing, all-encompassing horror, festering in your gut before rapidly eating away at the rest of you. Kilometers away from the bone-crushing clutches of an indomitable enemy. Heartbeats away from being swished around the fangs of a giant, like fine wine. You can feel the wind rattling through you, darting out of your lungs, and never before have you savored oxygen so much as now, when you don't know which breath will be your last.
"Dump the bodies."

The voice is cool, composed and effortless, spoken as if it's the most obvious solution in the world. It takes a moment—*one that you can't spare*—to process this, to realize exactly who has arrived. He's broken away from his designated spot kilometers ahead. Like a javelin shot out of hell, he slices through the plains, straight into the heart of danger. Abandons the safety of the formation's central column to run with the doomed.

Your gaze bolts to the shuddering white shrouds next to you, jolting with every lurch of the cart. He can't possibly be serious. All the teachings of the Church of the Walls riot around in your brain, indignant. As if failing to collect the rest of the fallen wasn't sickening enough, the Captain of the Special Ops Squad is now ordering you to discard what precious few bodies you have, like rubbish thrown on the side of the road?

"But we need to honor the dead! That's what triggered this whole mess in the first place!" you shout, waving your arm haphazardly in the direction of the mangled flesh that once formed Dieter and Jurgen.

With a flick of his wrist, Levi restrains his stallion, forcing Kenneth to slow down enough to keep pace with the heavy cart. You feel a twinge in your heart despite yourself; this warhorse was made to fly across the plains like a vengeful storm, not to plod along with beasts of burden.

"Dump them," Levi hisses. "Or we'll have even more dead to honor."

Stolen moments flood your vision, like sections from the Church murals set into motion. Sasha's incessant snoring. That morning, lifetimes ago, when her crumb-smeared face woke you up before the first day of training. Oluo delighting in finding out you were assigned to him for 3DMG training. The Special Ops Squad looking on in awe as you dodged Levi's pursuit during the First Advanced Exercise. Marco's brutal thrashing, and how hard your cohort worked to gain his forgiveness. The ruthless fights of the Third Advanced Exercise, dancing away during the Graduation Ceremony, struggling through the invasion of Trost, outmaneuvering Minister Nick in front of a bewildered courthouse.

Kenneth's rich, dark muzzle is aligned with you now, dark eyes never straying from the path ahead.

"T-the night of our graduation ceremony, C-commander Erwin said that we stood on the shoulders of all those who came before us," you choke out. "They gave us their blood, their lives, to defend all of mankind. *This-* you shake the corner of a shroud-*is all we have left of their sacrifice!* We *owe it to them,* to their families, to give them a proper farewell!"

Much like Kenneth, the Captain's icy gaze is fixed straight ahead, mouth twisted in a grimace. For a long moment, all you hear are thundering hooves and the rickety cart, tearing through the grasslands. You wonder if he's even seen *who* is lying under these shrouds.

"Can you *feel* sacrifice? Touch it? Taste it?" he asks quietly, ponderous. "*No.* Because the price they paid so that we might live, might save others—*that* goes far beyond this rotten existence. It's
the fuel igniting humanity's war against the Titans, and neither hell nor high water nor these
motherfucking overgrown toddlers can ever take it away from us."

Curved fangs and bulging eyes and meaty arms grow closer with every second.

"Keep holding onto those bodies, and their sacrifices will have been for nothing. You'll doom this
entire convoy."

There's a stinging pain behind your eyes and your mind echoes with a bloodcurdling scream and
your hands are trembling, and you can't, you can't, you just tore your heart to pieces betraying
Sasha once, you can't possibly be expected to do it again it isn't fair-

"I won't force your hand," he mutters. "I know it must go against your most basic instincts.
Nevertheless-," He jerks his head behind him, ebony locks flying backwards, towards the snarling
masses of flesh rapidly approaching.

You follow the motion.

"Will you really cling onto a bag of bones just to make yourself feel better?"

Sweat builds up under your collar, slipping down your chest and drenching your back. The noon
sun magnifies the Titans' oppressive body-heat; the humidity is so powerful, so tangible you feel
you could cut it with a knife.

"Do you truly believe this is what Sasha would have wanted?"

For some bizarre reason, you never thought you'd hear her name spoken aloud again, as though
when she died, her name died with her. Yet, here it is, blazing from the ferocious Captain's lips.
There's a reason Levi has asked you, and it's not simply because you're sitting on a cart with the
dead. You, the rookie soldier with a weakened right arm; there are hundreds of better candidates
to haul bodies off the cart, into the mouths of hungry Titans.
Truth is, you don't want to know why he handpicked you for this grotesque task.

Abandon the dead to save the living. Before you realize what you're doing, you wrap your fists around the still limbs next to you (you swear you can feel the cool, clammy skin, even through the shroud) and swing them off the end of the cart, aiming straight for the maws of the Titans. One by one they depart, with you silently bidding them farewell each time. They topple haphazardly onto the ground, giving the dirt a precious few seconds to taint the white shroud before they are scooped up by curious, hungry giant hands.

Hers is the last, and the only one that slips. The sun catches on her hair, burning strawberry-blonde locks into a brilliant copper. Hazel eyes are semi-opened, likely dislodged in the ruckus, as her head lolls back.

Gaping, you whirl towards Levi, stuttering an apology, that you should have thoroughly checked the shroud you never meant to expose Petra-...

An unblinking, gunmetal gaze follows her, every roll and tumble she curves into, right up until the moment the Titans cease chasing you. He's so entranced that it inspires you to look on, captivated in morbid horror. The solution is revolting yet effective; within moments, the herd of Titans has centered around the meaty flesh before them, ceasing their chase of you for less resistant prey.

By the time you glance back at him to see how he's faring, there is only empty grasslands beside you.

By the time you return to Wall Rose, the sun has climbed high in the sky, crested into late afternoon. All in all, you emerge relatively unscathed, plodding back through the gate while doing your best to avoid the eager faces awaiting you. In seconds, the elation of your waiting audience evaporates; ragged uniforms, blood-stained capes, bandaged limbs and suddenly the crowds dissolve into a nervous quiet.

Some wounds cut far deeper than Titan fangs ever could.

You, Connie and Levi are the only members of the Survey Corps to attend every funeral. Commander Erwin is present in the beginning at each event, dressed in full ornamental garb and addressing each family member by name. He presents them with a plaque, pension and honorary Survey Corps cape, before departing to make it to the next burial. While they're able to reign in their tongue in front of a Commander, it's Humanity's Strongest that they unleash their frustrations on.

Watching Oluo's sister is particularly brutal. Helmina Bozuo is nearly as tall as her brother, topped with the same floppy curls but far more intimidating. She made a beeline for Levi the second he came in, loudly interrogating him in the back of the room while her mother stutters out Oluo's eulogy.
Why couldn't you tell us the goal of the mission? Was it because you knew it would fail or because you have no idea what you're doing?

What are we paying taxes for, to fund you murdering my brother?

You call yourself a Captain, yet you abandoned your subordinates to save yourself?

"If 'Humanity's Strongest' can't even protect bodies then what good are you?!" Helmina shrieks, reaching for a glass.

You have to blink to believe what you're seeing. The Survey Corps' most skilled and revered soldier is standing completely drenched. The room is so quiet that you can hear the fat droplets roll off Levi's sopping dark locks, down his crisp uniform and plop onto the floor. It's not even his regular uniform that he's wearing, but his ceremonial outfit, one that he doubtlessly cleaned and pressed just for this occasion. Once, you would have crowed at this devastating public humiliation, delighted in his misfortune. Now you have half a mind to grab Helmina by those curls and tug a little sense into her obnoxious head. The disrespect, the indignity brought to your Captain, the man who had saved all these people from dangers they would never know, how dare she-?!

Eyes never leaving the Captain, she stares him down, admiring her handiwork.

"Get out," she hisses, before spinning on her heel and stalking back towards her mother.

Alone, with only the echo of her retreating footsteps and a hundred gazes fixed on him, Levi wordlessly turns and leaves.

Never in your life did you think you would find yourself here willingly. There's still time to turn around and flee, but now that you're here, you may as well. Before you can discover any hidden wells of common sense, you raise your knuckles and lightly rap on the door.

Silence.

It's a deflating, if predictable, outcome. Sucking in a breath, you decide to try again, louder this time. Drive your knuckles into the cool, dark mahogany.

"State your name and business." Incredible really, how the even the heavy wood isn't enough to dull the bite from his tone.

"Captain, it's me," you mutter. "May I please come in?"
Some more silence, because apparently there wasn't enough already. You move to try the doorknob, but find it locked.

"No response doesn't mean 'cartwheel the fuck into my office'," he barks from inside.

Huffing, you shift from foot to foot. You'll need to work around his mood. "Sir please, it's an emergency!"

"And the victims of this emergency chose to sendyou, of all people?" comes reply from other side.

Molars clashing together, you grit your teeth so hard your jaw hurts. When did 'Humanity's Strongest' morph into 'Humanity's Bitchiest'? You shift the book to your hip, and begrudgingly try a different approach. “Look, this will only take two seconds “

“No 'emergency' takes two seconds.”

"I'll leave you alone right after," you coo, buttery smooth. "And you can get back to work."

"Is that a promise?"

"Captain please!!" you wail in exasperation, slapping at the door. Whether it's urgency in your voice or your insistence that ultimately wears him down, he opens the door by a generous millimeter. You think you can almost make out half an eyelash of his, from this distance!

"So what's the emergency?" he demands.

Quickly, you capitalize on the breach in security, shoving the book through the crack in the doorway.

"What the hell is this?" Levi snaps. "I don't want your shitty dream journal."


Crisp, cream pages are tucked into an unassuming leather cover, bound together by two straps. Hardly sparing the book a glance, he fixes his attention on you. "Tch, if you're going to be this difficult to get rid of, you may as well come in," he grumbles. As you slip in, you completely forget about sneaking glimpses around his office. In fact, you are completely unable to move from the threshold.

His eyes are **red** and **raw**; more importantly, he knows you notice.

Haggard lines trail under his eyes, aging him beyond his years. Your careful appraisal of him is interrupted by a brutal interrogation about your preferences regarding tea. Black or green? Milk? Sugar? Honey? Cinnamon? Repeatedly, you mumble assurances that you'll only stay for a few minutes, so this really isn't necessary, but it does no good. In a few short moments, Levi has fixed you both a glass, setting yours opposite himself. Snaking around you, the tea's aroma
finally convinces you to venture deeper into his office.

After a quick sip, he sets to work. Just as Levi peels back the cover, his Adam's apple hitches. Samples of Petra's delicate embroidery. Letters in Oluo's sloppy handwriting. Gunther's sleek landscape sketches. Feather's from Eld's arrows, from when he used to hunt game. Page after page of mementos, a small shrine of the Special Operations Squad's history.

"I-i went to their families one by one, sir," you murmur, taking a seat across from him. "They were generous enough to part with these."

"You... went to their families," he echoes, gingerly turning the pages, like they might be crushed to dust if he's not careful. The Captain eagerly drinks in these precious details, guzzling them in as if they were his only sustenance. His eyes can't absorb the pages quickly enough. Your heart lurches as you notice him linger over Petra's page.

"As we were walking back, her father approached me," Levi begins. "Told me Petra sent him a letter about how she wanted to "devote herself" to “my cause". Told me that he's honored, but he thinks she's a little young for marriage. Couldn't find the fucking words to explain that there was no need to worry about a wedding. That he would never get to see his daughter in a bridal gown, because she’s wrapped in a funeral shroud, abandoned in a cold, dirty ditch somewhere outside the Walls. That the man whose cause she wanted to devote herself to let her die screaming in pain."

A part of you aches at the mention of marriage, and unbidden you're flooded with memories of Petra's subtle cruelty, but you squash it down. The priority here is honoring the dead and supporting your Captain, not your feelings, and you doubt he'd ever seen that side of her.

"I-I'm really sorry sir...that must have been traumatizing. But you didn't let anyone die. We all know you took every precaution. It's the nature of the job."

“She's just like Oluo, in a way,” He muses, and it seems he has forgotten that you're sharing the room with him. “Always with that look on her face, like I can do no fucking wrong. It was nice at first, attractive even, but then you feel like they're not really seeing you and it becomes unnerving. ‘Captain, what are your orders?’ ‘Captain, that was amazing!’ Shit, I didn’t even know that she deified me to her father…God help him, what a person to lose. Petra was sweet. Incredible with 3DMG and she'd follow me to the ends of the fucking earth, if I asked it. Would it have been better, would he have hated me less if I.... Is that how these things are meant to be…?"

Suddenly your presence is remembered and silver eyes flash towards you, assessing your thoughts.

“Sir, you two were very close, and she was a wonderful person, so it's only natural that feelings would develop,” you murmur. “Forgive me for prying, but did you like her? It’s okay to admit it, helpful for you even.”

"Hell if I know," he mutters with surprising honesty, scrubbing a hand across his weary face. "Not
like I had a fucking blueprint of what a normal relationship looks like to go off of. What about you?"

"...Sir?"

"You have a guy in Mitras or did Kirschtein steal you from him?"

"I'm not dating Kirstchein, or anyone in Mitras, currently," you reply, as neutrally as you can.

"But were you?" He presses, icy eyes boring into you. "Involved?"

"Yes." You're giving Levi as many social cues as you know how to get him to leave the subject alone. Whether he misses or willfully ignores them, you can't tell. Either way, he continues excavating, seemingly fascinated with this particular subject.

"Well?" He demands, staring at you pointedly. "What the fuck was Prince Charming like?"

"Perfect. Tall, decent looking, came from a good family, good stock. my mother was positively delighted with him. But he was a walking checklist that just...never really resonated with me." The words are tumbling out of your mouth, spilling like water, and it unsettles you how closely Levi is watching you. "Er, I didn't know how to break up with him so I guess I enlisted for Corps."

Levi lets out a dark, barking laugh at this, inordinately pleased. "Tragic," he declares, raising his tea to you in a toast.

You both take a sip. All too quickly, you swallow it down, tea blazing down your throat, chased by silence. Without sipping tea as a viable excuse, you're forced to confront the very tangible silence that the room has descended into. You realize that, as much time as you've spent in each other's company, you and Levi have rarely had heart-to-hearts.

"Oi, (F/N)," he say, rising to his feet. "If you don't have anywhere to be, let's take a walk."

“N-Now?,” you stutter.

“No, pencil it in for next Tuesday because I'm so fucking punctual about walks,” he snaps, stalking to the door and holding it open. It takes an embarrassing few moments before you realize the Captain is holding the door open for you, and you swiftly glide past. You ask if the Captain has a destination in mind, for this lovely little quest?

"Surprise me," he replies.

Selecting a spot for the Humanity's Strongest to relax in after witnessing a genocide? Sure, no pressure. You whittle away a good twenty minutes carving a path through the base like you know where you're going;, before ultimately deciding on a clearing across from the stables, shielded by a birch tree. Leaning back against the sturdy trunk, you lower yourself to the cool grass.
There's a sudden pressure on your thighs, and you can't help but inhale sharply at what you find looking down.

And who can blame you? His raging germaphobia makes any unnecessary physical proximity toxic to him. And yet, uninvited, Levi has settled his head onto your lap, mumbling orders to keep it down, Mitras runt. There's an arm draped across his eyes, veiling his expression. The other arm he uses to press your scrapbook into his heart, as if it might vanish the second he lets go.

It's not the first time you find yourself desperate to know what he's thinking. You feel oddly protective of him like this, concerned at how easily and carelessly Humanity's Strongest has given into slumber in these vast, open grasslands. So many opportunities for something to go wrong. Sunlight slips in through the leaves above, dappling his dark tresses with afternoon light. There's an overwhelming urge to comb your fingers through that raven hair, brush his bangs out of his face. To soothe him, to protect him from this wicked world.

"Oi, quit watching me while I sleep, clumsy pervert," he mutters, and you swear there's the smallest hint of a smirk. "I can feel your breath."

Recoiling like you've been burned, your back thumps into the tree. You hadn't even noticed when you had gotten so close. He mutters darkly under his breath (in a less than friendly tone), but makes no move to abandon the napping spot he has claimed.

Well alright. If you couldn't watch him, then you'd watch over him, over the two of you, as you wait in the empty, lonely fields.

Chapter End Notes

**Obambo:** from Central African folklore, a ghost of someone who died in the wilderness and has no proper grave to return to.

Whew, heavy chapter! Levi and Reader-chan have to deal with the heartwrenching consequences of the Female Titan's wrath, perhaps learning a little something about each other in the process...

Happy to clarify Levi's feelings a little more in the comments, but I'll avoid any interpretation in the author's note because I don't want to color your perspectives!
Thought I'd do a lighthearted chapter after the recent drama :) 

Thank you everyone so much for the comments, likes and unwavering support! I can't tell you how delighted I am to come home after a day of school/work and discover your detailed feedback. Beyond being enjoyable, your thoughts bring fresh, fascinating perspectives to this story that I can't really produce as its writer, given that I already know how it's supposed to progress and end. Sorry it has taken so long to respond, but know that I absolutely will respond individually, and that your kind words really do mean the world to me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Ordinary is such a flexible concept, so easily changed. In the heat of the moment, what's ordinary, what's expected, can feel all-encompassing, but ultimately is as flimsy and transient as the seasons. What was normal only a few weeks ago can so rapidly become extinct. Rare occurrences, phenomena, idiosyncrasies that make crowds murmur "this doesn't usually happen" will slowly, insidiously assume their role as commonplace.

For example, taking daily afternoon walks with the man who was once the bane of your existence (while once unthinkable!) has become your new normal. You can't exactly pinpoint when you two became routine walking companions; all you know is that the Captain will appear at your side at some point in the early afternoon, waiting expectantly until you complete the task at hand and join him. He's becoming rather shameless about it too, marching up to you at the Mess Hall when you were sharing tea and biscuits with Connie. Quickly, you stammer out the best excuse you can design to explain the situation- Captain promised to help me with strength training!

Dear Holy Walls, you don't want them to get the wrong idea, to think you two are voluntarily walking together every day. It would raise disquieting questions, ones you're far from ready to answer. Luckily, Jean isn't here or he'd... well you're not entirely sure what he would do, given he seems to be unusually busy lately, but you know he wouldn't let this pass without a thorough follow-up investigation. Connie raises a skeptical eyebrow but wisely says nothing.

Likely because the Captain stands behind you, deceptively calm, staring him down in silent challenge.

Levi's silence has also become a new normal for you. He isn't much for words, (and they're not particularly kind ones even when he is). Before, you dreaded being left alone with the fearsome Captain, desperately racking your mind for something to say. Anything to plug up the awkward quiet. Now, as you trek out to the familiar birch tree behind the stables, Levi's silence washes over you like a comfortable duvet. Chirping swallows, buzzing cicadas and the snug, familiar quiet of Levi's presence beside you. Nestled beneath the swaying branches, you allow your eyes to float over to the clouds above. Levi stares at you curiously, before deciding to follow suit, surrendering to the cool embrace of the grass. Wordlessly, the two of you take in the racing clouds overhead. Where do they go when they leave you behind, sailing over the Holy Walls three?

"What does that one look like?" you ask dreamily, pointing to your cloud of choice.

Perhaps Levi doesn't speak much, but when he does, it comes straight from the heart. Simple yet so very deep. It's a refreshing change from Mitrassian high society, with barbed motives concealed behind every word.

"An ass."

You frown. Not exactly the loveliest imagery, so you suppose you'll try again. "Hmm, how about that one?"

"Balls."

This delicate exchange goes on for about half an hour. Other members of Levi's prestigious list have included "Tits", "Turd" and one you're too embarrassed to repeat. "I'm starting to see a concerning pattern," you say, sitting up. "My psychoanalysis says you have an unhealthy obsession
with bodily functions."

"Thank you for the mind-blowing epiphany, Doctor. Here's you're tip," Levi says, smirking at your repulsed gape when he flips you off. Only one finger? Psh. Your exceptional services deserve at least two. You tell him as much.

"Wow, never knew you were such a cheapskate," you sniff.

Levi joins you, snapping up into a seated position and squinting. "I fucking hate the day," he grumbles. Wincing, he raises a forearm to shield himself from the sun.

“I know,” you mutter darkly, deepening your voice to imitate him. “Fucking sun. Shining and golden and all that shit. Ugh.”

He seems less than enthused with your impersonation, staring you blankly for a solid minute before speaking. “I can’t see, you insufferable brat,” Levi mutters, rubbing at his eyes. “Not like at night anyways...”

This little tidbit piques your interest. You want to ask, but you’re not sure if he’ll appreciate it, so you remain watching him, hoping he’ll get the hint and elaborate.

“Eyebrows had me checked out by the medics early on,” he mumbles, avoiding your pointed gaze. “Turns out growing up in the Underground seriously fucked up my vision. I mean, I can see during the day, it’s just like sandpaper being dragged over my eyes.”

Well, now you feel awful, mocking this poor man's eye condition like that. Holy Walls! As if the Underground hadn't stolen enough of his childhood with its gnawing poverty and incessant violence; the hellhole also the saw fit to compromise his vision too.

“They… they can’t adjust?” you say in as even a tone as possible. “Your eyes I mean. You’ve been on the surface for a while now, haven’t you?”

Grimly, Levi shakes his head. His eyes are directed meters away at the distant training fields, but he doesn’t seem to see them, and it’s not because of his crippled vision. “Turns out our eyes develop mainly when we’re young. By the time I got out...” he trails off, waving his hand in a gesture of well, there you go.

It never ceases to amaze you, to horrify you, just how much had been taken from this single man.

“But I bet you must have excellent night-vision,” you chirp, trying to inject a positive note. “Like a cat!”

He lets out a soft, bitter laugh. “Like a cat,” he agrees.

You lean in close, like you're going to whisper classified Survey Corps information. "You know, they say felines have nine lives," you say softly, squeezing his shoulder. "Getting to begin again each time. A chance to be born anew."

Silver eyes slide over to you. He doesn't move closer, but he doesn't move away. In fact, Levi seems to be holding his breath, not budging a millimeter. Like a rare dove has landed in his vicinity, and the slightest move will break the spell.

"In that case," he murmurs, gaze solemn, "how many lives do you think I have left?” Unflinching, your response is ready to fire.
"I wouldn't know, I'm a dog-person."

Scoffing, he lightly shoves you away as you dissolve into cackles. A shining example of compassion, you most certainly are! Rising to his feet, he offers you a hand. "Come on, let's get you back, brat. I'm sure your... aptitude for irritating anyone in a 10 meter radius is wanted elsewhere."

Escorted by the sullen Captain, your journey back to castle grounds is as quiet as the departure from the Mess Hall. Lately, you're starting to find something so liberating about Levi's company, an unspoken promise of protection while under his watch. For the first time in an eternity, you don't have to scout the immediate vicinity for the slightest threat, not while he's here. Freed from the burden of neurotic vigilance, you allow yourself to enjoy your surroundings. Spring is just starting to bloom. Blue Stokes' Asters dot the grounds, their spidery petals opening up to the warming weather. Lovely as they are, the flowers are unable to keep your attention; instead, you are bewildered by the unwavering gazes and hushed murmurs following you around. The closer you edge back to the castle, the more and more looks the pair of you are starting attract. If the Captain notices (which surely he, of all people, must!), he gives no indication, marching onward without missing a beat. Although he says nothing, never once glances at you, you've come to read him well enough to detect that he's perturbed. Color rushes to your face; all these theatrics because you two haven taken to afternoon strolls together? Such an innocent activity, twisted in the mouths of gossips into something illicit. Whether it's guilt or strategy, your mind launches to Jean; he has been notably avoiding you the past few days; could he have started a rumor about you and the Captain?

Mind abuzz, you don't even notice that Levi has decided to accompany you all the way back to the female barracks this time, something he hasn't done since your excursion to the Underground. Struggling to make sense of the audience of gaping soldiers trailing you, you nearly walk right into Hange, who stands outside your door. Finally, someone to talk sense into these insipid busybodies who always seem willing to believe the worst of you-

"Private (F/N) (L/N)." Hange greets, backed by Moblit and two other Survey Corps vets. "You are under arrest for suspicion of being the accomplice of Annie Leonhart, the Female Titan."

There's no rhyme or reason here. No sense of time, no sense of location. Locked in a nightmare from which there is no awakening.

Also, physically locked in an undisclosed holding cell, but that's besides the point. This isn't the standard military prison you've been dragged to, far from it: if the security detail is anything to go by, this area is permitted only to those with the highest security clearance within the Survey Corps. Meaning that any of the rookies who know you personally, who could testify to your innocence, would have no idea where to even find you.

Oh yes, ordinary is such a flexible concept. The new normal you just warmed up to has been completely upended in a matter of heartbeats. It's astounding, what ultimately did you in. Many moons ago, Hange's investigation for the murder of Sawney and Bean appeared to lapse into a
dead end, with the assailant remaining at large. A cold case or a senseless prank, frozen in time. Nevertheless, the cunning Major hadn't forgotten. In fact, she had predicted something like this might happen, that her subordinates- either intentionally or irrationally- would destroy the key to humanity's future. So she frequently doused her Titan children's napes with bleach.

"Care to hazard a guess why, hmm?" Hange says, owlish eyes looming in front of you, magnified in her glasses. "It's fine, I'll tell you. Waiting for you to figure it out would take much too long, anyways. The chemical properties of bleach accelerate the rusting process, which absolutely ruins metals. How convenient then, that we discovered a rusted set of 3DMG, depleted of gas, stashed under your bunk! The only set within our armory to have rusted to such an enormous degree!"

The horrifying reality of her accusation drops on you with the weight of a cannon. When Hange first started hunting Sawney and Bean's slayer, every Survey Corps member underwent a mandatory inspection of their gear. Originally, you and Armin suspected that Annie had stolen Marco's-- who was likely long since dead at that point-- gear to pass this inspection. Without a speck of rust, full of gas and with a dent that looked curiously like the one on Marco's, this pristine gear set cleared Annie from the list of culprits. Yet that never explained what had happened to her own gear, which begs the question: if Annie sealed herself inside a crystal, who held onto her gear during this time? More importantly, when did they break into your room to frame you?

"Did you really think no one would find it there?" Hange says, laughing hysterically, before her palm slams into the stone by your head. "At least try and be creative m'duckie. Anything else is an insult to my intelligence."

"I swear on my life, on every last stone within the Holy Walls!!" you scream for all you're worth. "Please Major Hange, you've got to believe me. I would never help someone threatening humanity, threatening the sanctity of the Holy Walls! I worship The Walls!"

"So does the Church," Hange replies coldly. "And yet, orders to "abduct the Titan Hybrid" signed by Minister Nick himself, on official letterhead, were found in your barracks after a thorough search. Odd, isn't it?"

Digging her nails into your scalp, she murmurs,"The evidence doesn't lie, (F/N). But you're so very clever aren't you? So can you explain this curious letter about abducting Eren to me?"

Wincing, you can feel skin break under her talons. Clenching your teeth, you grind out your response. "W-what motive would I have? Why would I possibly ah!-

She jerks your face forward, lips dancing over your ear. "Silly, silly (F/N). You must be confused," she hisses. "It's not my job to answer your inane questions; my job, in case you were wondering, is to extract the truth from treasonous worms or eviscerate them trying!"

With that, your spine is slammed against the paltry wooden chair they have you sitting in, you careen back, back, back, yelping as you topple over-

until Hange rams a heel onto your knee, forcing you down, fixing you to the ground.

"But in the end, it matters little, whether or not you answer to me,“ she states, voice bland. "Because I've recruited a certain someone to my cause. And he's claimed first dibs on your...Enhanced Interrogation."

At this, bile skyrockets up your throat, threatening to spill out any second. You've heard this specific phrase before, reserved for perceived enemies of the state, or deserters. Pretty words to cloak what amounts to torture of the cruelest brand. Your nerves are firing up with pain, as if
you're already being torn apart.

All of this for a crime you never committed.

You're not sure how much time passes before a gravelly voice assaults your ears. Chills shoot down your spine. The hairs on your neck prick up. You didn't catch the words, but the voice is alarmingly familiar.

"Come to visit the prisoner, sir?"

"She and her accomplice slaughtered nearly a quarter of our forces. It's only fair that I return the favor. And I'd hate to keep a lady waiting."

The scathing tone blazes your, ears absolutely unmistakeable. Etched into your memory. For over a year, you have been its primary target. There's only one person it could possibly belong to. You have always prided yourself on your level-headedness; but here, now, panic floods through your system. Stomach roaring with hunger, you're roughed-up and weak and sleep-deprived. Shackled in an undisclosed holding cell, with friends and family unawares. At the mercy of one of the most sadistic people you've ever had the misfortune of meeting.

"What's the basin for, sir?" one of the guards pipes up.

"Is there a brain between those ears, or do you just use that space for storage?" The newcomer spits. "To collect her blood, dipshit, what else? You know I hate messy workspaces."

And he's idly chatting about your blood like it will be spilled by the buckets.

Embarrassed, the other guard scrambles to recover from his colleague's stupid question. "A- Anything we can help you with, sir? We wouldn't want to burden you with something beneath your station."

Holy Walls, they're not even blinking an eye! You're about to be bled out like a lamb chosen for the slaughter, and they want to ask if the butcher needs any help. Erwin's pretty speeches about camaraderie be damned, you are completely and utterly alone here. The teamwork and loyalty and honor everyone keeps rambling about are as real and useful to you as the Corps' beloved Wings of Freedom- a pathetic emblem stitched onto capes that will, in due time, become little more than funeral shrouds.
"Spare me the groveling," he sneers. "I'll take it from here. This is above your experience. You'll only get in the way."

"We'd love a chance at the bitch, make her fucking pay," guard number two says, sniffing an opportunity for a promotion. "That's what I'd call poetic justice."

"Get out of my sight," he hisses. "That's what I'd call an order, jackass."

Dutifully as ever, your traitorous guards abandon their post, saluting him and shuffling away. With each retreating step, you shrink further and further into the icy stones behind you, praying to the Walls that you can squeeze yourself through the holes in the mortar and vanish. You can't tell if that's the beat of your heart raging in your ears, or his approaching footsteps, getting louder and louder. The door looms in front of you, threatening to give way to your predator any second now. This is the man who can slice and dice the Titans (the greatest threat humanity has ever faced!) like they're little more than paper; what will he do when he finally catches you?

You have no weapons on you. No energy. No chance.

It's over the second the door creaks open; you don't hear it thud close afterwards. You no longer feel the cool stone digging into your skin. Silver-blue eyes hone in on you, piercing right through, pinning you in place and you can think of nothing else. Cocking his head to the side, he watches you, unblinking. Almost reptilian. Pure, unwavering, unemotional focus. He sets the bowl and a black leather bag down.

Two gloved fingers beckon you forward. You don't dare follow the motion.

"Come."

Trembling, you can feel your limbs physically shaking, shuddering with a life of their own. All you can do is stare back at him, teeth chattering. You didn't know you could fear a fellow human being so much. Bertolt's hefty frame, Annie's duplicitous cunning, Minister Nick's intimidating clout—none of them can even compare. 

Is he even human? One who can strike you so numb with terror?
Slowing himself down, as if he'll spook you into running away, he reaches for the miserable wooden chair. Jimmies it under the door handle, then trying it to make sure it's secure. As if anyone was coming to help you; the guards outside this cell have long since left. "Little Mitras runt," he drawls over his shoulder. "We always knew it would come to this didn't we?"

He begins his approach.

The wall has melded into your spine right now, and you have no intention of disentangling yourself. You ignore his questions in favor of watching his every move; you refuse to entertain his mental torture (not that you could answer through your shuddering jaw).

"I warned you, didn't I?" he says, taking a few languid steps closer. "Your very first day here, what did I say?"

His movements are unhurried and casual, but those eyes are too sharp, too alive for him to be as relaxed as he's trying to appear.

"I said you didn't belong. I told you to turn back, to run while you still could," he admonishes. "And now look what's happened."

Before you realize it, he's nearly crossed the distance between you. Silhouetted by the torches behind him, he's a phantom blur, his shadow swallowing you whole.

"GET AWAY FROM ME!" you shriek.

"Easy, easy," he purrs, eyes flashing dangerously. "Keep sti--!!"

Closing the distance to you means that the door lies abandoned, yours for the taking. This trick failed you once before, back in Mitras, but you'll be damned if you go down without-

An arm snatches you around the belly, pinning your back against him. Thrashing, you kick out in every possible direction, shrieking bloody murder. Each time a limb escapes his grasp, Levi's quick to slam it right back in place, wrestling you still. "Breathe, brat," he grunts. "Nice easy breaths, in and out." A wolf whispering to a trapped fawn. Hissing, you struggle fruitlessly. He would be the type who plays with his prey, before the kill.

"I'm going to let you go now," Levi announces calmly, as though speaking with a toddler. As though he knows you don't stand a chance. "Stay put, if you know what's good for you."

Releasing you, Levi takes a step back. Peels off his jacket, eyeing you all the while. Spreads it out on the floor, likely to keep it blood-free, and rolls up his sleeves. Halting your plans for the moment, the clay basin is deposited next to you. Dropping into a crouch, Levi digs through the bag. What'll it be first? You wonder with morbid curiosity. The classic knives? Or pliers, careful and precise? Perhaps he'll just go to town with a brutal hammer?

"Roll your pants up, as high as they'll go. Take off your outer-shirt," Levi commands. It seems there is little choice but to comply, at least to buy yourself some precious time. This leaves you in a thin tank and crinkled jodhpurs cuffed to your knees. Exposed. Irritatingly fragile. He produces two metal canteens, pours their contents into the basin.

"Sit."
Dragging your back against the stone, you slowly lower yourself to the ground. Feel the scrape of every inch of stone across your spine.

"No, " he orders. "On the jacket."

Furrowing your brow in concentration, you wonder if you've gone delusional under the sheer stress of the last few days. Or has it been weeks? What on earth is his angle here? Squeezing your legs to your chest, you try to touch as little of his jacket as you have to.

What happens next cinches it; you really have gone mad.

A blessedly cool cloth is pressed to your ankle. His left hand becomes a bassinet for your heel, supporting your foot in the air while he diligently scrubs away at the grime coating your skin. You blink again, three times, but he's still there, still going at. Captain Levi Ackerman, Humanity's Strongest Soldier and Most Notorious Germaphobe, is kneeling before you, washing your feet while you sit perched on his jacket. You have no idea how to process this particular hallucination, but Holy Walls you can see yourself getting addicted to whatever drug fueled this bizarre vision.

Or perhaps he's only doing this to better appreciate his handiwork, the gashes and injuries he'll no doubt riddle your corpse with? Regardless, you figure if you thank him now, you may be lucky enough to broker some good will. Perhaps he'll recall your afternoons together, lounging beneath the birch tree.

At your murmured appreciation, he reels back on his haunches, as though electrocuted.

"Thank you? Thank you?" He scoffs in contempt. "Tch, how little do you think of me, to thank me for not torturing an innocent bystander? I'm not a fucking savage, (F/N)."

"N-no, no that's not it at all!" You yip, voice cracking.

"Or is that how you view anyone from the Underground?" he sneers, teeth bared. It's been so long since anyone's shown you any kindness. A week full of a shouted questions, of people glaring at you like you were no more than a centipede, of rumors eviscerating your good name, tearing it to shreds.

"No one has bothered to hear my side, Levi, can you believe?" you cry out, laughing desperately. "Not a single damn person has so much as wondered if there is one iota of a chance that I'm telling the truth. Too quick, too eager to believe the worst of me. They've always been!"

At this, your manic laughter disintegrates into stinging tears. Levi looks bewildered only a second; the next, he rushes forward. Gathers you up in his arms, cradles you between his knees. Sobbing, you bury your face in the warmth of his neck.

"Oh, my poor little Mitras runt," Levi coos, nuzzling your hair, drowning himself in your scent. "Were you really that frightened?"

"You brought a basin to collect my blood!" You snap, balling your fists into his dress shirt. "So, sorry for the cold welcome!"

"Forgive me, forgive me," he murmurs between peppering your forehead with soft kisses. Pauses to comb your unruly hair. "Didn't think that the girl who hunted down the Female Titan still knows how to fear."

You wail incomprehensibly into his cravat, which reminds you, who in their right mind wears a
cravat to a torture session?

"Did you honestly think I'd let anyone harm you?" Levi says in a breathy chuckle. As if the thought is so absurd, so out of this world. "I'd break every last bone in their damn bodies, grind them to dust if they so much as tried," he mutters darkly. "They would rue the fucking day they laid eyes on you."

You sit there for a while, huddled beneath the flickering torchlight as he rubs warm circles into your back. Levi rests his lips against your temple. Presses kisses into the skin whenever you stir, just to remind you that he's still there.

"Precious," he mutters, lifting your tear-stained face to his. Kissing over your eyelids.

Cautiously, you eye him. As far as you're concerned, the only person you can trust is yourself. "Why do you believe me?"

He runs his knuckles along your spine, digging into each of the vertebrae. "I know you're telling the truth because you're the only soldier whose barracks were isolated for any extended period of time. In fact, I can tell you exactly why you were chosen to be the scapegoat, and when this was committed."

"M-mitras," you breathe. "When we went to Mitras for the mission."

"You're quick to catch on," he hums. "At that point, the quarters were left occupied only by Sasha. Would have been child's play to sneak in while she was out and plant the evidence."

"If it's so logical, why can't anyone else see that?" you protest.

"Know your audience, runt. You make a damn appealing target," he points out. "Half the Corps is dirt poor, from broken homes. It's easy to despise someone who comes from the elite, inner-fucking-sanctum that is Mitras. That being said... there are a few others with enough brains not to give in to the mass hysteria. Few, but they're on your side."

Noble intentions, but you want nothing to do with this false hope. You can't bear to have your heart soar, only to be struck down once more. "Levi, don't sugarcoat this," you plead. "Hange has made abundantly clear the gravity of the situation. If there's no way out, if I'm going to be killed, then at least do me the kindness of telling me."

Winding his fingers in the hairs at the nape of your neck, he grips your skull. Forces you to confront striking blue-gray eyes. If you never see the morning sky again before you die, then you thank the Holy Walls you were able to gaze at those eyes, rivaling the dawn in their beauty.

"Let me take care of it," he whispers, smothering your wrists in his other hand. "Put your trust in me. I swear to you, in due time there will be nowhere left for our dirty fucking traitor to run."

Swallowing, you grant him a small nod.

"There's a good girl," he purrs. "Rest easy, Mitras runt. You're not without allies here."

After that, he permits you to give yourself a sponge bath as best you can. Sneaks you an apple, the first decent meal you've had in ages, and collects the core from you once you've finished. Just as
Levi heads out, he throws you a terrifying smile over his shoulder.

"Oh and one more thing. I've always loved a good fucking hunt."

Chapter End Notes

...did I say lighthearted? I meant labyrinthine and possibly heart-wrenching :D

_Aristophanes_: To be extra obnoxious, the chapter title refers to an ancient Greek playwright, Aristophanes. His work "The Clouds" has a really interesting take on cloud-watching: the clouds will morph into a shape that exposes the true essence of the observer. A criminal, for example, sees clouds in the shape of wolves. Not sure what that means about our Captain ;)

So any ideas as to who framed you? Careful with your guesses now...this story has started departing from the original work.

Cunning, _conniving_ Captain. Letting you work yourself into a tizzy.

End Notes

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