The Strange and the Usual

by lalazee

Summary

When Eren finds himself stuck in what is essentially a halfway house for supernaturally inclined misfits, there's no stopping the veritable shopping list of events that leave him pushed closer and closer to ex-exorcist, Levi. But when is it ever that simple?

Notes

Hey guys! Welcome to le fic. I don't speak French. Anywho! This is my first foray into SNK fic, although it's not even near my first rodeo in terms of long fic. I hope you stick around and enjoy the ride. Comments and all that jazz are extremely welcome, I'd like to get a feel for how it's going!
“Eren? Eren.”

The first thing Eren was conscious of was a voice that he didn’t recognise. Soft, male. The second thing he realised was how he felt. Like he'd been hit by a truck that was carrying a ton of bricks.

“Wake up, Eren. You're safe, now.”

At that, Eren's eyes sprung open. Because what the ever-living fuck did it mean that he was safe now? When had he been in danger before?

He shot up in bed – why was he in bed and whose bed was this – and inspected the small, tidy room with panic rising in his throat.

At the end of the bed sat a man in a chair, one slim leg crossed over the other. His suit and tie were immaculate black, his shirt crisp white. His hair mirrored the colour of his suit, but the undercut didn’t fit with his otherwise militant look. He had the face of a gorgeous rockstar who'd endured a week's worth of wild after-parties and hadn't yet slept a wink.

Over his right shoulder was a man, closer to a boy. Dishevelled blonde hair like a halo, sombre, dressed casually. He looked like a nice guy.

The one who was sitting did not look like a nice guy.

“What -” Eren's voice cracked, dry and painful. He swallowed, looked between the sitting man and the standing boy. “Where'm I?”

“You don't remember.” The man's voice was lower than expected, grave and dark.

“Why else would I be asking?” Eren fisted his hands in the sheets. “And where the hell are my clothes? Who changed me? Who're you?”

The man held up a silencing hand, his eyes narrowing. They were gunmetal grey. “First off, shut up. Second, listen. Think you can manage those two? Just nod. Good.

“My name's Levi and you're in my house. You'll be living here until I say you're not, and during that time I expect you to fall in line and do as you're told. It's already obvious that you're the type who rarely keeps his trap shut, so let me get this out there now. My money pays for this room, this house, the food. So you'll respect me or face the consequences. You don't want to know the consequences.”

“What the fuck, man?” Eren clenched his jaw. “I'm not a damn kid -”

“Compared to me, you are.”

“And I sure as hell am not staying here, wherever here is.”

“Hell may an accurate assessment.” When Eren didn't reply, only glared, Levi sighed and delicately scratched his jaw. “It's not uncommon for exorcism survivors to lose time. After all, it wasn't exactly you inhabiting your body for that period.”

“I – what?” Eren looked to the blonde boy for answers, but only received a vague shrug and small smile in return.
“Look at me. You remember before, don't you? Before everything? Hearing voices, sleeping for
days on end, seeing shadows that weren't shadows.”

“I don't.” Eren realised his fisted hands were shaking on the covers, his skin prickling with a cold
that swarmed him from the inside out. “I mean, I guess, yeah. And that was -”

“Overly emotional people are more prone to possession that most. Your sort are just disgustingly
empathetic.”

“Guess you're immune to possession, then,” Eren said, proud that his voice didn't waver and give
away his confusion, his fear. It wasn't that he found this all impossible, it was because he believed in
all of this shit that he was terrified. Eren looked to the blonde again. “Is this all real?”

Levi frowned and flicked a look to to the boy over his shoulder, then back to Eren. “Don't ask stupid
questions.”

Eren forced his fingers to unfurl on his lap and looked down at his hands. “So you... exorcised me,
then? I'm okay?”

“He doesn't do exorcisms anymore;” the blonde said, his voice hushed.

“No,” Levi said. “My partner did, Father Erwin Smith.”

Eren looked up, his eyebrow raised. “Your partner as in...”

“Christ, you've been conscious for all of ten minutes and you're already on my shit list. My partner as
in the guy who does exorcisms and leaves me to clean up the mess he leaves behind.”

“Am I a mess?”

The first ever hint of a smile pulled at Levi's lips, and that might have actually been more frightening
than his seemingly customary frown. “Yes, Jaeger. You are.” He folded his hands atop his knee.

“You see, just because you've been exorcised doesn't mean you're finished. For a time, you're going
to be more vulnerable than ever. You've just had your insides scrambled around by a demon -”

“A demon?”

“And you're just a shell at this point. Very easy to crack. Very easy to break open, should another
entity wish to. The people we exorcise come to stay here, in my home, for an average of ten days so
that we can monitor them. Make sure they're strong and ready to go back into the world.” Levi's
expression shifted. Or, maybe it was just his eyes. His features betrayed very little, but his eyes
looked haunted. “Some people never come back from it. They stay here too. Indefinitely.”

Eren blew out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. “Well, fuck me.”

Levi's eyebrow twitched. “Anyway, I'm sure you'll be fine. In the meantime, get dressed and meet us
in the dining room. Breakfast is served at 7 sharp and if you're not at the table by then, you get
nothing. It's not a fucking restaurant. Today is your one exception.”

Eren had to smile, just a little, at Levi's demeanour. He looked to the blonde again to see if he found
Levi just as amusing, and found that the smile was returned.

Again, Levi looked over his shoulder, just a bit longer than he had last time, then back to Eren. He
sighed and stood, straightening his fitted suit jacket. He was short. Like, really short.
“Wow.”

“What?”

“Just.” Do not say that he is short or he'll probably cut you off at the knees to bring you down to size. “All if this. And stuff. It’s crazy.”

“Kid, you ain’t seen crazy, yet.”

With that, he was out the door, the blonde following after a friendly wave.

“Hey!” Eren called out, after the door was closed. “I don't even know what fucking day it is!”

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Eren found a suitcase beside his bed, packed neatly with his clothes, his journal, iPod, toiletries. His cellphone wasn't among his things, and he wondered if it was some rule that they couldn't interact with the outside world or something. If that was the case, it was a dumb rule. Not that he had many people in his life that he needed to contact. Without a doubt, his dad would know he was here, and that was about it on his list of important people.

He pulled on jeans and a flannel shirt, socks, and padded out into the hallway. He was upstairs, and there were five other doors aside from his. One was probably a bathroom, which meant there were maybe three or four other people like him in this house. And Levi.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Eren slunk downstairs. Reaching the bottom, he turned on his heel in the direction of muddled voices – and nearly bumped into the blonde kid.

“Oh.” Eren openly inspected him. “Hi. We didn't get introduced.”

“Armin,” he said with a half smile. “Sorry I couldn't properly greet you before.”

“S'okay. That Levi guy kind of scary.”

“He grows on you.”

“Like a rash, or?”

Armin huffed a soft laugh. “You'll be good for him.”

“Yeah?” Eren ruffled the back of his hair. “Can't see how much good I can do in ten days.”

“Maybe you'll be here longer.”

“Damn well hope not. How long have you been here?”

Unfamiliar male laughter rumbled from a few rooms over, and Armin looked in that direction, his face obscured as he said. “Longer than I'd like.”

Eren frowned, but didn't ask. “Well, at least we can hang out. Pass the time and stuff.”

Armin's expression lit up. “Yeah. I hope so. Thank you. Thanks.”

Eren gave him a funny look and laughed. “No need to thank me, dude. You coming to the table?”

“I'm okay,” Armin said, as he swept past Eren and headed up the stairs. “I already ate. See you later,
Eren.”

“See ya.”

The smell of pancakes lured Eren towards the direction of the dining room. The house was spacious, Victorian-looking, all shiny wood floors and rainbow light through stained glass windows.

Upon arrival, Eren hung back in the doorway for a moment, taking everyone in. This all still felt surreal. Sitting at the table was a girl with black bangs so long that they nearly hid her eyes. Next to her was the guy who must’ve been laughing. He was tall and handsome and had a smile like the devil. Across from them was a blonde woman with a hook nose and a face like she’d been sucking lemons. They seemed kind of within his age group – late teens, early twenties.

Levi sat at the head of the table. He held a cup of tea in one hand in the weirdest way Eren had ever seen, and a newspaper up to his face with his free hand. As if Levi sensed Eren's gaze, he dropped the paper and flicked an eyebrow.

“You sitting or you're just going to loom like a freak, Jaeger?”

“Uh.” Eren looked around the room as everyone went silent and stopped eating so that they could stare at him. Taking a seat at the other end of the table, directly across from Levi, Eren sent everyone an awkward wave. “Hi. I'm Eren. Recently exorcised and all that, I guess.”

“Hey, bro,” the guy said. Christ, he was one of those assholes who said bro. “I'm Jean. This stunning beauty beside me is Mikasa.” How could she be beautiful if half of her face was covered? “And that frightening creature over there is Annie. If I didn't know any better I'd say she was Levi's daughter.

Annie rolled her eyes and barely bothered to look at Eren before she began eating again. She did kind of have the sulky countenance of Levi, but with a bit more teenage angst thrown in.

“Why does anyone ever leave the introductions to you?” Mikasa said, her voice husky and pleasant. She gave Eren a blatant once-over and then, much to Eren's surprise, offered a quick smile. “It's nice to meet you, Eren.”

Eren found himself smiling back, relief flooding his limbs. He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it hadn't been this.

They all seemed relatively normal.

Upon later consideration, Eren would decide he had probably jumped the gun on that kind of conclusion.
Chapter 2

“I slept for two days?”

“Do I need to say everything twice to you?” Levi led Eren into what looked like a small library and shut the door behind them.

Eren wandered in, goggling at the sheer amount of books from floor to ceiling. The room was full of warm, autumn tones with worn, brown leather armchairs and dark wood tables. It was so damn welcoming that Eren had no clue how this house could equate with the starkly black and white guy currently sinking himself into one of the chairs.

Levi gestured for Eren to sit. “You were possessed for about a day, went through an extensive exorcism for another twenty-four hours, and then you've been here for the last forty-eight. It's not uncommon, Jaeger.”

Eren flung himself back into the chair. “Can we not act like this is all normal, because it's fucking with my head.”

“It's normal in my world, and now mine is yours. So suck it up and deal with it.”

“What the fuck happened to me, Levi?” Eren hadn't realised he'd yelled it until it was over and he was panting for breath. It was as if he was seriously starting to realise that this wasn't all some bizarre dream.

Levi drummed his fingers on the luscious leather arm of the chair as he studied Eren. “It's almost impossible to tell exactly how these things happen. What's the last thing you remember? Look back. Hard.”

Eren exhaled a shaky breath and stared at his knees, stretching his memory back. “Just... feeling this weight. This weight on my back, on my chest, like being in a coffin. Like being claustrophobic in my own skin. I felt so heavy that I – that I just laid down on the floor and closed my eyes.” Eren swallowed hard, looked up to find Levi watching him with a look that, for once, wasn't cutting. Eren shrugged. “And then, when I opened my eyes, I was here.”

“And how do you feel now?”

Eren scoffed. “As if you care.”

“I don't care, you fucktard, but it's my damn job to make sure you don't walk out of here and get fucked up the ass by the next passing aggressive spirit.”

Now that Eren thought about it, he still felt like he'd been in a ten car pile-up. His joints ached and there was this very distant ringing in his ear that he couldn't place.

“I'm fine, fuck you very much.”

Levi rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “I hate kids.”

“I'm twenty-two, you dick.”

“Whoopdy-fucking-doo.” Levi propped his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his cheek on his palm as he carefully considered Eren. “In the past couple of hours that you've been awake, have you
been seeing things, hearing strange noises, feeling someone touching you when no one is there?"

Eren laughed and leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “Are you crazy?"

Levi smiled. A full, sharp smile, like a predator.

Eren froze, unsure why the hell his heart was leaping in his chest or the hairs on the back of his neck
standing on end. “I said I'm fine.” So not fine.

“Yeah, okay, kid. So, listen up, here's the deal. Think of your time here as an extended vacation.
You may or may not feel it right now, but your body is hung over from the ordeal you've been
through. Have you noticed the bruises all over you?

“Now that you mention it.”

Levi gave him a bland look. “Wow, you're real fucking observant, aren't you, kid?”

Eren glared. “I kind of had other things on my mind. What the hell are you here for, anyway? I
mean, I know it's your house and all, but you don't do exorcisms anymore, so -”

“Where did you hear that?” Levi sat up straighter, his mouth a thin line.

“From -” Eren's brow furrowed and he vaguely waved a hand. “Y’know. Armin.”

Levi may have already been pale, but he went dead white. “Who?”

“Now who's having to repeat themselves?”

“Shut the fuck and tell me what you just said.”

Eren gritted his teeth. “Shut up and or tell you what I said — I can't do both at the same time.”

In a flash, Levi was out of his chair and gripping the arms of Eren's, leaning over him like some dark,
menacing angel. “Armin. You said Armin said that.”

“Yeah! What the fuck is wrong with you, man? When I woke up, you and Armin were there and he
said you don't do exorcisms anymore. What's the big goddamn deal? I don't care what you do or
don't do, I was just wondering -”

Levi placed a finger over Eren's lips, effectively silencing him. His eyes were a piercing, clear grey
of a blade. “Armin is dead.”

*Dead? Dead as in in-trouble-dead or as in in-the-ground-dead?*


“Don't talk about this to anyone. They won't want to hear it. Neither do I.”

Before Eren could reply, Levi was turning on his heel and stalking towards the door. Hand on the
knob, he paused and looked over his shoulder, his face composed once more. But for the eyes. They
were like glinting razors.

“You might be here a little longer than ten days, Jaeger.”

Eren's head was whirling. He couldn't keep up with this day, with this person. “Why?”
Levi inclined his chin. “Because you've been seeing ghosts.”

Eren's jaw dropped. “So, when you said Armin was dead it was because he was dead.”

“I find it physically painful to talk with you, sometimes.”

“Levi...” Eren shook his head, as if that would realign his scattered thoughts. “This can't be happening.”

“It's happened. It's happening.” Levi released a long breath and jerked a shoulder. “Come on. I'll give you a tour of the house.”

For the next half an hour, Levi refused to even acknowledge Eren's questions about anything supernatural. In turn, Eren learned Levi lived on the bottom floor and if Eren dared go into that sanctuary that was his bedroom, he would be castrated. He saw a small room with a gym, a giant kitchen with an island and stools in the centre, the dining room, two sitting rooms – one with a massive television – a wide back patio complete with rocking chairs, and a large back yard.

They were standing on the back porch, side by side in the cheerful midday sun when Eren smiled. “This garden just begs for a dog.”

Levi shifted just enough to look up at him with a dubious expression. “Dogs are messy.”

“Dogs are forever friends.”

“Wow, you are a loser, aren't you?”

“Says you.”

Levi's eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to imply I'm a loser? Because let me remind you who is paying your room and board.”

Eren grinned and ignored him. “I'm just saying that if I brought a dog here you wouldn't be able to refuse him.”

“You clearly know nothing about me.”

“Guess only time with change that.”

Levi huffed a humourless laugh. “If you think we're going to be BFFs by the time you're through here, you've got another thing coming, kid.”

“Maybe it's you who'll want to get to know me,” Eren said, giving Levi the slightest nudge.

“No.”

Eren's next retort was cut off when he noticed a movement towards the end of the garden. Armin, walking alone. Eren felt a chill go down his spine.

“So, uh, what's the deal with everyone else in the house?”

“You're best asking them yourself. But the short of it would be that Jean is a recovering victim such as yourself, but he's bound to be gone soon. Mikasa is desperate to return to college, but she's encountered some difficulties. And Annie is permanent fixture. The rest is their business to share with you if they choose.”
“Fair enough.” Eren's eyes followed the lone figure's seemingly aimless pass across the grass.

“I get it now,” Levi said softly.


“That glazed look in your eyes. You had it when we first met, when you kept looking over my shoulder and I couldn't see a thing. He's there, isn't he?”

“Yeah.” But Eren found he couldn't seem to tear his gaze from Levi. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so fascinated by a man's beauty. “This is all really weird, you know. It's not even noon.”

Levi's steadily held Eren's stare. “You're doing better than most. At least there was no hysterical crying.”

“I'm actually a bit of a cry baby. Hopefully you never have to see that, though. It's a mess.”

The corners of Levi's mouth tipped up for the briefest moment, and then he was turning away to face the garden once more. Eren looked out as well, just watching, taking it all in. Taking his life in. His panic had subsided, but a deep worry had screwed itself into his belly. This was all wrong. He was a freak now, wasn't he? He already had an abnormal life - now it could only get worse, it seemed.

Levi's voice was hushed amongst the brightly chirping birds. “Does he look unhappy?”

“Kind of. But he was really nice when we talked.”

“You've spoken?”

“Like, had a conversation? Yeah. I told him we'd hang out. He looked happy about that. I get it now.”

Levi made a non-committal noise. “Did he mention me?”

Eren glanced at Levi, saw that he was staring into the distance with a wrinkle in his brow. As if he was trying to see what he simply couldn't.

“Just that I'd be good for you.”

At that, Levi actually laughed. Eren visibly startled – not because it freaked him out, but because it was one of the sexiest laughs he'd ever heard.

“Fuck's sake. That kid'll be the death of me.”

Without so much as a word of goodbye, Levi turned around and went into house.

Eren took a weak breath and followed. Christ, what was his life?
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Thank you for the comments and support, they really help me write. :) Sorry about how short the chapters are, but I tend to write in quick spurts (hehehee, I mean, I am a mature adult) and I prefer to post that way rather than wait ages and post something big. Anyway, next bit should be up tomorrow, most likely! We have some good Levi/Eren bits coming up, then.

“By the way, where's my cellphone?” Eren asked, following Levi into the kitchen.

Jean was there, standing in front of the open fridge, just looking in and letting all the cold air out.
Levi grabbed a kettle that sat on the hob and moved to fill it with water from the sink. “It's not with your things?”

“No.”

“Then your dad must not have packed it. He was the one who got your shit together.”

Ugh. “You have a landline phone? I wanted to call and let him know I'm okay.”
Jean snorted. “You're how old and you still check in with your parents?”

Eren narrowed his eyes. “Parent. Just one. The other one is dead, if you wanna joke about that, too. Dick.”

Jean blinked. “Well that escalated quickly. Chill out, bro.”

“If you bro me one more t-”

“Eren,” Levi said sharply, “Phone's in the hall.”

Eren was more than fucking happy to leave that room. He knew well enough to trust full grown guys who still called people 'bro'.

The phone was easy to find, and his dad picked up after the first ring. He actually sounded like he cared that Eren was okay, that he was healthy. Well, there was a first time for everything.

“But how did you know to call, like, a priest of all people when I collapsed? Why not an ambulance?” Eren asked, leaning his forehead against the wall as he spoke. The morning had taken it's toll on him and he was suddenly bone-tired.

“That's something for another day, son.”

“Cryptic as ever.”

“Would you really like to have this conversation over the phone, Eren? Just concentrate on getting well. I'll be away on business for a few days, but if it's an emergency I do have my cell on me.”
“Sure, fine, whatever. And where's my phone?”

“Yours? Oh. I didn't think to look for it. Do you really need it, where you are?”

With a groan, Eren banged his head lightly against the wall and ended the conversation shortly after. For someone so book-smart, his dad could be a serious dumbass.

And what the hell was all that about having a 'conversation' another day? How the hell had his dad even had a number handy for a fucking exorcist? He wasn't about to let this go any time soon. Maybe Father Smith had some answers, wherever he was.

A thunderous headache was working it's way behind Eren's eyes. Without letting anyone know where he was going, Eren headed silently up to his room and collapsed onto the bed, face first. He was down for the count before his thoughts could linger on demons, ghosts and retired exorcists with killing auras.

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Eren woke up with his ears ringing again. He wondered if that was the noise that startled him from sleep, when a knock sounded at his door and he figured it was probably that instead.

Groaning with his face in the pillow, Eren found it in him to push back off the mattress and sit up. “Yeah?”

“Dinner,” Mikasa's voice sounded from the other side.

Eren squinted blearily at the bedside clock and realised he'd slept the entire day away. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept through the middle of the day. He was always either working part-time behind the desk of the fitness centre or going to classes at the local college – the latter, which he found to be a complete waste of his time.

Speaking of work, what the hell were they thinking about his absence? Eren would need to bug Levi about that.

This was all so royally fucked up.

“Eren?” Mikasa said, knocking again.

“Yeah?” Eren got up and opened the door. He knew by the way Mikasa's eyes went straight to his hair that he had extreme bed head. He ran a hand through he mass of it and gave a slight smile. “Can't believe I slept that long. Thanks for coming to get me.”

“It's no problem.” They walked side by side down the hall. At the top of the stairs, their hands happened to brush and Mikasa gasped softly and recoiled, as if burnt.

Eren took a step back, eyes wide and hands held up in innocence. “Woah, woah! You okay?”

“I...” Mikasa closed her eyes for a moment, took a long, slow breath. When she opened her eyes again she looked composed once more. “Sorry. I don't like to be touched.”

“Oh.” Eren wasn't going to ask. It wasn't his business.

“Ever since my exorcism, I haven't been able to touch people, things. A lot of things.”

Eren frowned. “What do you mean?”
Mikasa shrugged. “There are technical words for it, but I prefer the term touch-know. I touch things, and I know about who touched the last, their past, their emotions. I touch people and it's the same.”

“So, just now?”

Mikasa shook her heavy bangs from her eyes and looked up at him with what could almost be a look of affection. “You've been through a lot.”

Eren shrugged. “Most people have. Let's go down before Levi tears us a new one.”

“You've already gotten to know his personality well, I see,” Mikasa said with some humour lightening her tone, as they headed down the stairs.

“Terrifying control freak with dom tendencies?” Eren said with a grin.

Mikasa was actually smothering a laugh behind her hand when they walked into the dining room.

Jean was the first to look suspiciously between them. “What're you guys all of a sudden, dating?”

Mikasa spared Jean only the barest of glances as she slid into the seat beside him. “Some people are a lot easier to get along with than you, Jean.”

“I'm ridiculously easy to get along with,” Jean said, stuffing a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. “Right, Annie?” He pointed the fork at her.

“Don't get me involved with your schoolboy crush, horse face,” Annie said with an abysmal expression as she merely poked at her food.

A raucous argument begin, with heated but fairly harmless words being exchanged. It was kind of like a big, twisted family.

Eren found himself sat at the very end of the table again, in straight-ahead view of Levi. Preferring to look down at his plate, Eren wondered at the last time he ate. Not just ate a proper meal like this gorgeous roast chicken with all the sides, but ate anything.

It was then, as Eren held his fork and knife, that he realised how bony and delicate his wrists were now. He frowned at them and resolutely began to stuff his face.

“Did you enjoy your rest, Sleeping Beauty?” Jean asked Eren towards the end of their meal. Eren was already on second helpings.

Narrowing his eyes at Jean, Eren set down his utensils and leaned back in his chair. “Tell me, Jean, do you sleep standing up?”

Jean looked rightfully suspicious. “No. Why?”

“Oh, just because most horses do.”

Snickers came from both girls, and Eren even caught Levi smirk around the glass of water he brought to his lips.

“Watch yourself, pretty boy,” Jean said tightly.

“Why should I, if you're doing it for me? I slept amazingly, by the way. What did you do with your time?”
Jean opened his mouth, but Mikasa was the first to speak. “He pretend to help me with my homework. It was a noble effort, anyway.”

“Homework?” Eren asked, more than happy to ignore Jean.

“I haven't been to school for months now, too many people. I've had to drop out of a few classes, but other teachers have conceded to continue emailing me assignments and letting me take the tests online and stuff. I don't want fall behind more than I have to.”

“Wow, that's pretty admirable, actually.” Eren couldn't help but be impressed, especially considering how he and schoolwork had always mixed as well as oil and water. “How's it they let you do it, though?”

Mikasa shrugged. “We've all got sick notes to our respective jobs and schools.”

“What do you mean?”

Levi spoke up for the first time since Eren had set foot in the room. “There's an exorcist within our group who's a doctor. She basically writes you all glorified sick notes, dealing with this or that ailment and we get it straightened out for you. It doesn't always work. People who are here for any length of time are bound to lose their job.”

“I can't afford to lose my job,” Eren said, anxiety creeping up his throat. “I wouldn't be able to survive, otherwise.”

Levi raised his eyebrows, apparently unconcerned. “Then get well soon, brat.”

“I already feel fine – so what the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

Eren received a look that blatantly said, We both know you're not okay. Gritting his teeth, Eren looked around the table. “So what the hell am I supposed to do with my time? It's only been a day and I'm already bored.”

The ringing in Eren's ears was back and he rubbed one of them hard, with the palm of his hand.

Mikasa must have been picking up on Eren's aggravation, because she said in that no-nonsense fashion she seemed to have, “Let's go watch a movie, Eren. Everyone's welcome to join.”

“I'll watch as long as it's not a chick-flick,” Jean said, scraping his chair back.

“As long as it's not brainless comedy,” Annie said.


Mikasa sighed. “Fine. I'll go pick something. Eren, you make the popcorn. Lots of it.”

“Will do.” Eren stood and started to collect their plates. When he sidled up beside Levi and leaned over him to take his plate, Levi gripped his wrist firmly.

Eren screwed his face up in annoyance. “What the -”

“You're too skinny,” Levi said.

“You're about the same as me.”

“And about five inches shorter. Anyway, keep eating. The weaker you are, physically, the higher the
chance there is for repossession.”

That was the absolute last thing Eren wanted. He nodded soberly at Levi, unnerved at their close proximity. He ripped his hand from Levi’s grasp, took the last plate, and escaped into the kitchen.
The living room was like the rest of the house. Cosy, and more how Eren imagined a kind old lady would have as a home. Not Levi, who looked like he'd walked out of rehab a month previous. Eren could imagine him living in some sparse studio apartment with black and white photography on the walls.

“Brat,” Levi said from his spot beside Eren on the couch. “Don't hog the popcorn.”

Eren slid his glance over, trying not to look like he was staring. Levi had taken off his suit jacket and rolled his sleeves up, neat and crisp. His shoes were off, his socks black, and his legs folded beneath him as he leaned against the arm of the sofa. He almost looked relaxed, if it weren't for the glare he was aiming Eren's way.

Muttering an apology, Eren shoved the bowl onto Levi's lap and attempted to concentrate on the movie. It was a mindless action film, but Mikasa and Jean looked immersed in it. Mikasa was either so into the movie that she didn't notice Jean's arm fling over the back of the couch behind her shoulders, or she didn't care. Or, most unlikely, she wanted Jean all up in her business. Eren inwardly shuddered at the thought.

Annie had wordlessly taken the floor, laying on her stomach with her chin resting on her palms as she looked up at the screen. Eren wondered about her, but didn't even know where to begin speaking to her. But he had time, anyway. Today was just day one.

Day one felt long – too long. Today was a day where Eren could have used his mom around to talk to. Even if just to hold his hand and tell him it'd be okay – even if it wasn't true.

Eren squeezed his eyes shut tightly, kind of alarmed at the sudden tears that had sprung up. His barriers really were down today. He took a quiet breath and tipped his chin back, resting his head against the cushy sofa. He let himself sink in, feel the warmth of all the people around him. Levi had shifted position a bit and his feet were lightly pressed against Eren's thigh.

Drifting off before he found it in him to snap awake, Eren dreamt of wading through a thousand voices, a thousands hands grabbing at him. Everyone was talking in his ear, everyone needed something of him, expected him to do something, and none of it made any damn sense. Fingers scraped at his throat, pulled at his hair – and when one pair of hands came up and clamped around his neck, Eren shot up with a strangled gasp.

Blinking wildly into the darkness and seeing only hot white blotches, Eren clamped down on the panic that clawed up his throat.

When a soft, cool hand rested at the nape of his neck, Eren nearly jumped out of his skin.
“Eren.”

Whipping around in the darkness, Eren gawked at Levi. His face was sharp lines and shadowed hollows, his eyes unreadable.

“What's going on?” Eren managed to say, his words lagging and heavy with sleep.

“You passed out on me less than half-way through the movie,” Levi said. “Literally. On me.”

Eren rubbed his eyes and groaned. “Sorry.”

“You fuckin' sweat on me, too.”

Feeling his temple, he realised his hair was damp. Suddenly, Eren was extremely glad the lights were out.

“I think the obvious answer here is that you could have just woken me up.”

“I wasn't about to go to bed when everyone else did, anyway.”


Levi punched Eren in the arm, fucking hard. “Shitty brat. The remote is across the room and the TV automatically turns off after two hours of it not being touched.”

“First off, ow. Second, you still could have just woken me up.”

“Well, you're awake now, so you can go away.” With that, Levi stood fluidly and brought his arms above his head, his fingers linking as he stretched them up and back, his spine curving almost artfully in the shadows.

Eren followed suit and got to his feet, surprised to find himself looking down at Levi once he'd come to his full height. Eren kept imagining that when Levi stood he would tower over everybody.

“Thanks for staying with me, anyway,” Eren said quietly.

“Yeah, yeah. Go get some more rest, Sleeping Beauty.” With that, Levi brushed past him and left the room.

Eren stood in the dark and sighed. He really couldn't read Levi if his life depended on it.

***

Eren Eren Erenererencanyoutell himplease Eren I'm okay tellhimtellhim TELL HIM!

Eren shot up in bed, gasping for air and reaching out for nothing. Or had he been fending something off? All he knew for certain was that he was sweaty as hell and had another jackhammer headache.

Groaning, Eren stepped out of bed, collected a clean pair of boxers, jeans, and a teal and black plaid button up. He needed a shower, he needed to feel human. Since he'd woken up in this house, he'd felt anything but.

Thankful that he hadn't run into anyone in the hallway, Eren stepped under the scalding spray of the shower with a grateful sigh.

A memory of someone splashing holy water on Eren's face – and consequent shrill, inhuman scream
Eren had released – shot through Eren like fiery needles. Eren slapped his hands on the slick tiles, eyes wide as he stared into nothingness with horror. His knees felt like jelly, a whimper working it's way up Eren's tightening throat.

Eren turned and slid down the wall of the shower, folded his legs against his chest, and wrapped his arms around him. Resting his brow upon his knees, Eren breathed. And breathed. And breathed.

He didn't know how long he sat there, reminding himself to breathe.

“What the fuck, Eren?” Jeans voice followed a loud rapping on the door. “Are you having a lengthy session with your hand in there or what? Other people live in this house, too.”

“I -” Eren found his voice parched and rasped. He coughed and cleared his throat. “Shut the hell up – I'm out, I'm out.”

It took every ounce of strength to get to a stand and quickly finish his shower, towel his hair off, and dress. He tried his best to ignore the spotlights of pain behind his eyes and just get on with things. The sooner he showed he was fine, the sooner he'd be free of this place.

In the hallway, Eren passed Jean with a glare. Jean began to return the rotten stare, when instead his eyebrows scrunched together.

“You alright, bro?”

“Oh, what?” Eren said, unable to keep up with this one-eighty turn.

“You don't look so hot, y'know?”

“I -” Eren closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment. “I'm fine, thanks. Headache. Bad o-”

TELL HIM, EREN. I'M OKAY I'M OKAY I'M OKAY.

Eren cried out and dropped to his knees, clutching his ears. A voice, a voice, a voice in his head, not outside but inside, raking against his skull and carving through his brain like a splintered nail on a chalkboard.

He vaguely heard his own voice beneath the crushing din of the other. “He's okay, he's okay, I'm telling, I'm telling, I'm telling.”

Eren saw a face, and freckles, and then everything went black.

***

Eren opened his eyes and slowly blinked away the glaze of sleep – or had it been unconsciousness?

“I'm glad you're awake,” came Levi's low voice. From his chair beside the bed, he locked icy eyes with Eren. “So I can kick the shit outta you.”

Sitting up, Eren dragged his palms roughly over his face. “You've got a crappy bedside manner.”

“I'm not Nurse fucking Nightingale.”

And yet, that didn't seem to stop Levi from propping his elbows on his knees and leaning forward. He filled Eren's space just a little too well. His gaze bore into Eren. “Headache?”
Eren frowned. “No, actually. Not anymore. I feel fine.”

“Let's just say that from now on I'll be the one who decides if you're fine or not.”

Eren made a face, but didn't argue. In a way, it was kind of nice for someone to care. Even if it was just Levi's job. It was his father's job to care about him and he still didn't manage that.

Feeling too old for his age, Eren carefully shifted his legs over the side of the bed and sat facing Levi. “So, uh, what happened?”

Levi raised both eyebrows minutely, his mouth twisting. “I'm the one who should be asking you.”

“Well, you're the fucking expert here.”

“Well, I can't tell you shit until you fill me on your little episode, you idiot.”

Eren shrugged. “I had a headache, I heard a voice. Like, a loud voice. Inside my head, I guess. It hurt – felt like my skull was gonna crack open. And then... I don't know.” He frowned at Levi, his head cocking. “I saw someone.”

“Jean?”

Shaking his head, Eren squinted at his knees, trying to bring up the face. “My age. Jean's age. He was just a guy. A lot of freckles. He was yelling at me, but not like aggressively. Like -” He met Levi's eyes again. “Desperately.”

“A spirit?”

Eren laughed humourlessly. “Are you asking me? I don't know anything about anything.”

“Shitty brat. First Armin, now this guy.” Levi leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs, his face sober. “It's impossible to make an educated guess out of just two incidents. But I did warn you that you'd be sensitive. The way exorcism survivors’ bodies react to the healing process is different.”

“Well, this is a shit process.”

To Eren's surprise, Levi snorted a soft laugh. “You have an awful way with words.”

“Says you.”

“Says me.” Levi stood and buttoned his suit jacket. He nodded to Eren. “Come down when you're ready. And if you start to feel all Sixth Sense again, tell me.”

Eren gave a mock salute and managed a grin. “Yes, sir.”

Levi rolled his eyes before he turned and walked out the door, closing it behind him.

The second Levi exited, Eren's cheerful expression evaporated. He looked around the quiet room.

“Hello?” Eren said quietly. “I'm listening.”

He waited for five minutes, then ten. Nothing came. All he could hear was the hum of the air conditioning, his own breathing, and that distant, nagging ring in his ears.

With a sigh, Eren heaved himself from the bed. “Well, I tried.”
Eren headed downstairs and hoped for as normal a day as possible. All things considering.

But Eren already knew he was asking for too much.
Eren had missed breakfast, so he'd chosen to grab an apple and a bottle of water from the kitchen. He tossed the apple in one hand and meandered out the back door and onto the porch.

He stopped dead as he saw Armin sitting on one of the rocking chairs. Eren swallowed hard, considering just backing the fuck up out of there. Then he remembered the way Armin's face had lit up when Eren said they'd hang out.

Eren sighed and stepped around the empty chair beside Armin, with a smile at the ready. "Hey, again."

Armin physically jumped in his chair with surprise and looked up with wide eyes. Then he beamed. "Hi! You scared me."

All the tension in Eren's body dissolved as a laugh bubbled up in his throat. "I'm pretty sure it's supposed to be the other way around," he said as he plopped down in the rocker.

Armin winced. "You figured it out."

"Actually, I was kind of told. By Levi." Eren bit into his apple, chewing slowly as he watched Armin make a silent 'o' with his mouth.

"So, he knows. I hope he's okay. Not mad or anything."

"Can't you find out yourself?"

Armin shook his head and stared at his hands. "Not all the time. I fade in an out. I don't know where I go, but sometimes it's like I never even existed."

Eren cleared his throat and looked away, out towards the garden. "Well, I know you exist. Levi does, too, even if he doesn't want to talk about it."

"So, he was mad?" Armin said with expectant eyes toward Eren.

Eren shrugged and took another bite of apple, waiting until he swallowed to speak. "I don't know, it's hard for me to understand him. I think he was more shocked than anything. He said he didn't
want to hear about it, and neither did anyone else.”

“Oh,” Armin said softly. He looked back down at his hands.

They were both silent for a while, as Eren finished his food. He fiddled with the core and bit his lip. “So, uh, what happened to you?”

“I'm starting to forget.”

Eren frowned. “What d'you mean?”

“I can't remember my family anymore. Chunks of my life.” Armin met Eren's eyes, and it was impossible to imagine that he was a spirit. He looked as solid as the chair on which he sat. “I'm disappearing, Eren. I'm frightened. I don't want to be nothing.”

Eren shook his head furiously. “No one is nothing, Armin. I've only talked to you for a little while, but I can tell you're the type of person that people like – that people want in their life. I know I would. I mean, I know I do.”

Armin's eyes glistened, and his smile was so young. Too young. “Thank you, Eren. I'm glad I met you, even if it was too late.”

“It's still not too late,” Eren said quietly. “We're here, aren't we? This feels real to me, y'know? Let's just make the most of it. If you ever want to talk, or just have company, come and find me.”

“Okay, Eren. I'd like that. Thank you.”

“Eren?” Levi's voice made Eren jump out of his seat and stand to attention. He was miles more frightening than any ghost. Levi was standing on the porch, dark eyebrows scrunched up, his mouth sour as he stared hard at Eren. “Are you talking to yourself?”

“Uh.” Eren quickly noted Armin's now empty chair and looked back at Levi with a smile. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

“You're a shit liar, Jaeger.” Levi stalked over, fire in his eyes. “Did I not tell you to come to me if you experienced anything unusual?”

“Weeeellll...”

“If you make it one week in this house without me snapping your scrawny neck, it will truly be a miracle.”

Eren couldn't actually tell if Levi was being serious or not. He swallowed and laughed nervously, running a hand through his hair. “But it's not like... you can really do anything about it...or anything.”

Levi folded his arms across his chest, his entire face going deathly still. “Excuse me?”

“It's not that I don't wish my life would go back to normal, okay – but the way things are right now, you're pretty useless to me.”

Levi didn't blink, didn't move. His expression was stony. Then he blinked once, twice, turned on his heel and walked away.

Eren shrugged and said to no one in particular, “Jeez, I was just saying.”
Wandering into the dining room, Eren found Mikasa sitting at the head of the table, taking notes while surrounded by text books.

“Hey,” he said, sitting down adjacent to her. “Where is everybody? The house is... quiet.” He ’d almost had said dead quiet, but Eren was quickly learning that the dead weren’t exactly the shy type.

Mikasa didn’t seem bothered by her study interruption. She blew her bangs from her eyes and popped her pen behind her ear. “Annie’s at school.”

“What, high school? Can she do that?”

“She lives here permanently. She doesn't have anywhere else to stay, so she's basically just going about her life as normally as she can.”

“Oh. Man, that sucks,” Eren said as he absently scanned Mikasa's open books. It looked like anatomy and stuff. Maybe she wanted to be a doctor. “And horseface?”

Mikasa's lips quirked. “I think he's packing his things. He's leaving soon. Unlike some of us, his exorcism seemed to go in one ear and out the other.”

“Somehow that doesn't surprise me,” Eren said with a grin.

“It'll be quiet without him, though.”

“I think you mean blissfully relaxing.”

Mikasa took her pen from behind her ear and twirled it like a baton between her fingers. “He's not so bad, once you get used to him.”

Eren couldn't help but stare in wonder. Well, it took all sorts of people to make up the world.

As if on cue, heavy footsteps stomped down the stairs. Moments later Jean was strolling in, lugging a large cardboard box. He dropped it beside Eren with a thump, and heaved a sigh as he slumped in the seat beside him.

“Are we all talking about me?”

“Yes,” Mikasa said at the same time Eren vehemently said, “No.”

Jean grinned and shrugged. “It's hard not to, I know, I know.”

Eren rolled his eyes. “The minute you're gone, I -“ He'd looked down into Jean's open box and choked on his words. “Who is that?” Eren said at a whisper.

“What?” Jean said, leaning in. “Are you a fucking geisha – talk louder.”

Eren grabbed the photo frame and shoved it in Jean's face. “This – who the hell is this?”

Jean went white and still before his face flushed red. He yanked it from Eren's hands and set it back in the box, this time face down. “What the hell's it t'you, Jaeger?”

Eren could hear his heart pounding in his ears. “I saw that person. I think. The freckly guy you're with.”
“When?”

“This morning.”

Before Eren could react, Jean had Eren's shirt by the collar, was dragging him up from his seat and yanking him nose to nose. “Is this some kind of sick joke? Marco is fucking -”

“Dead!” Eren yelled, wincing as he watched Jean's fist go up and pause midair. “He's dead, Jean, I know he's dead. Christ, let me go.” Eren shoved Jean hard, but the only reason they really broke apart was because Jean seemed to go slack and pale once more.

“Eren,” Mikasa said quietly, carefully, “What's going on here?”

Eren's mind was scattering his hands shaking as he muttered, “Tell him, tell him I'm okay. That's what he was saying. That was – that was...” Eren looked up and met Jean's eyes. “Marco. He wanted me to tell you that he's okay.”

“What,” Jean said hollowly. He looked boneless, like he was about to collapse. He swayed once and Eren ran over to put Jean's arm over his shoulder. “What,” Jean said again, blinking owlishly.

“Since the day I got here I, uh, have been seeing things. Hearing things. This morning, when I -”

“When you fainted like a girl,” Jean said quietly.

Eren narrowed his eyes. “Passed out. When I passed out, it was because someone was yelling in my ear. Just before it went dark I saw him. He was standing behind you. It was Marco, Jean. I recognise him.”

“I killed him.”

Eren turned sharply, nearly smacking his forehead against Jean's. “What?”

“K-killed him.” Jean's voice broke.

Mikasa stood and went to Jean, put her hands on his cheeks. “You know that was an accident, Jean. You weren't yourself. No one in this room would judge – we've all been where you have.”

“You mean -” Eren swallowed hard, “When you were possessed you – woah!”

Jean had swung around, wrapped his arms around Eren's neck, and buried his face against Eren's shoulder. “He's okay?” Jean said wetly against Eren's ear.

“Uhhh, well I mean he's dea-” Eren caught Mikasa's death stare. “Yeah. He's fine. He's not mad at you or anything. He's with you, I guess. That's how it seems to me.”

From behind Jean, Levi entered from the kitchen. He stopped in the entryway, his expression relaying nothing. But Eren could see Levi's gaze travel Eren and Jean's embrace from toe to head. Their eyes locked from across the room and Eren was the first to look away.

“Um. There there?” He patted Jean's back. “It's okay.”

Jean sniffled loudly. “Thanks, bro. We cool?”

Eren looked between Levi and Mikasa, then back. “Uh, so cool, yes, yup.”

Eventually, Mikasa and Eren were able to pry Jean away from him. Eren offered to get them drinks.
while Mikasa cleaned up the mess that was Jean.

Eren swept past Levi with a loud exhale of relief. If this was what the whole talking-to-dead-dudes talent led to, he wasn't sure how many messages he wanted to pass along. He didn't know what to do with crying people. He didn't know what to do with people, in general.

Ducking his head into the fridge, Eren took a moment to close his eyes and take a breath.

“Thank you, Eren.”

Eren whipped around at the sound of Marco's voice, and yelped when he ran straight into Levi. Surprisingly strong, steady hands reached out and grasped Eren's biceps, likely stopping Eren from falling directly on Levi.

With a raised eyebrow, Levi said, “Expecting someone else?”

Eren looked over Levi's head with a frown, seeing no Marco. Maybe that was the last of him.

“Don't look over me,” Levi said between gritted teeth. “I'm not a fucking wall to climb, dipshit.”

“S-sorry.” Eren met Levi's eyes, found that he still couldn't read them. He offered an apologetic and hopefully vaguely charming smile. “Distracted.” He peered down to where Levi still gasped his arms. “Um. I'm probably not going to fall on my face now. You just surprised me.”

“Or something did,” Levi said as he released his hold and took a step back. “So, you solved your first mystery.”

“My first? Oh.” Eren grinned and ruffled his hair. “Guess so. Maybe I'm useful for something, after all.”

Levi cocked his head slightly, then shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“There's still one mystery left, though.”

Levi's eyes narrowed. “That is?”

Eren shrugged. “Armin. Can't you tell me what happened?”

“No.”

“Come on, Levi, I deserve -”

“You don't deserve squat, you stupid little shit,” Levi hissed, suddenly invading Eren's space, eyes flashing bright and menacing. “My house, my rules, so you shut the fuck up when I tell you.”

Eren stumbled back and smacked shoulders against the still-open refrigerator. Everything inside rattled loudly, just as he too felt. Before he could retort, Levi had retreated and Eren could hear Mikasa hollering for their drinks.

“Coming!” Eren continued to lean against the fridge and looked up to the ceiling, puffing out a long breath.

He couldn't tell if his hands were shaking from Levi's ferocity, or how their close proximity had revealed Levi had the softest, palest smattering of freckles across his nose that Eren had ever seen.
Chapter 6

Hi, hey, hello my lovely readers! Thank you for all the support thus far, it really means a lot to me to hear from you guys.

We've got more characters coming in after this chapter, plus all sorts of good Eren & Levi stuff. I know, I'm one of those torturous character development people, but I can't help myself.

I'm tracking on Tumblr 'fic: the strange and the usual' and 'lalazee'. And, like I said, my Tumblr is atomicblonde.

Thank you for reading!

“Hey, Annie,” Jean said absently as the front door opened and closed.

Eren didn't look up from the video game he and Jean were playing. Gaming made Jean relatively quiet, and this was a good thing in Eren's book, so he was happy to join in for a little Resident Evil. On top of that, he felt guilty for traumatising Jean this morning, and there was nothing like a little mindless killing to lift a person's mood.

“Hello,” Annie said as she wandered in and sat herself on the couch.

A shudder chopped harshly down Eren's spine at the sound of Annie's voice. It didn't sound like her at all. There was a weird echo in her voice.

Whipping his head around, Eren saw -

“Goddammit, Eren!” Jean said as he keysmashed violently. “What the ever-living fuck you doing? Don't look away, don't look aw- gaaah, we're dead! We're dead, Eren. Are you happy, now? Because I'm so thrilled that I could punch you in your stupid girl eyes.”

“Annie...” Eren looked her up and down, unable to tear his gaze away. The crescendoing tattoo of his heartbeat struck him nearly deaf. “Are you okay?”

Jean glanced over his shoulder with a bored expression as he inspected their friend. “What the crap, Jaeger? She looks fine.”

“I'm fine,” Annie said, her words reverberating strangely in her throat. But it was her face – her face. Didn't Jean see it?

Eren ran a shaky hand through his hair and finally tore his gaze away. “Ha, yeah, you're right. Sorry. Um, excuse me a second.”

“Now's not the time to take a dump, dickhead,” Jean called after him as Eren disappeared around the corner and into the hall. “We're mid-game!”

Eren pressed a hand against the wall, trailing it along the wallpaper for balance as he stumbled down
the hall.

No skin. There was no fucking skin on Annie's face.

As if Eren had been peering past the first layer, he'd seen only bloodied bone and flexing muscle. Her neck had been pink, ropey cords, like uncooked meat. And her hands – hands like something out of a nightmare, like white spiders that clicked and clattered together when Annie had set one on top of the other.

Resident Evil could never stack up.

“Levi?” Eren said, his voice breathy and hollow and certainly not loud enough to call anyone's attention. He wove his way further towards the back of the house. “Levi.”

Eren checked the library, the back porch. His knees felt weak. He could see nothing but that face, and the wet, darkened eye sockets that had held Annie's glazed eyes.

“Levi!” Eren burst into the gym, heaving a sigh of relief when he saw Levi deadlifting a barbell that looked like it carried more weight than Eren's own frame.

Levi was facing away, but in the wall-length mirror he caught Eren's panicked expression. He had earbuds in, and Eren could distantly hear some serious screaming rock blasting through.

Closing the door behind him, Eren watched Levi drop the barbell, just as Eren's legs finally gave out and he slumped against the wall, sitting on the ground.

“Eren?” Levi was on his knees before Eren in an instant, earbuds removed and hanging by their wires out of his t-shirt collar. His frown was barely noticeable, but the concern in his eyes swirled dark, mercurial grey. “What's happened?”

“Annie...” Eren stared at Levi blankly, distantly noting that Levi had his hair clipped away from his forehead, atop of his head. A hysterical laugh tickled his throat, but he swallowed it. “There's something wrong with her.”

Levi's expression went sharp. “Explain.”

Eren was reaching up with a heavy hand to touch the hairclip, when Levi smacked it away and snapped his fingers in front of Eren's unfocused eyes. “Oi, Jeager. Get a fucking grip. What kind of man are you?”

“S-sorry.” Eren shook his head, blinking hard against the little white spots of panic freckling his sight. “There's something wrong with her. Her face, Levi. Her face isn't there.”

“What?” Levi's eyebrows furrowed. “Eren, are you high?”

“No, you asshole!” Eren shoved Levi hard in the shoulder and felt his face start to flush and heat. “Annie had like two different voices, I swear to God, she did. Annie isn't Annie, but Jean couldn't see it like I could see it. I don't even know what I was seeing.”

Without a second thought, Eren lurched forward and rested his forehead upon Levi's shoulder. Eren inhaled the clean musk of Levi's slightly sweaty shirt, and sighed softly. He felt his pulse slow, his muscles relax, if only a little. “Look into it, okay? Trust me.”

Levi's voice was quiet, controlled. “I do.”
Eren could hear the gritty music slamming from Levi's iPod, which he hadn't bothered to turn off in the rush. He could hear his own stuttering breaths and very vaguely the even thud of Levi's heart. It was only then that Eren realised this was the first time he'd seen Levi out of the pristine suit. His sweatpants were black, and so was his shirt, and – and oh, Eren's brain was frying to a blackened blob, because from both elbows up, Levi had ink. *Tattoos.*

“Break time's over, brat,” Levi said suddenly, moving to a stand and letting Eren nearly fall on his face one Levi's support was removed. “I'll take care of this.”

Eren frowned at the floor, then froze as Levi walked past and briefly, subtly brushed the tips of his fingers over Eren's hair. Barely there, but enough to send the nape of Eren's neck prickling with delight.

The door was shutting behind him and Eren was left to stare at his reflection in the far mirror, wondering how the hell this had become his life.

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In the bathroom, Eren splashed icy water on his face, looked into the mirror – and squealed like a little girl. Eren swung around, gripping the lip of the sink behind him.

“Jesus *Christ,* Armin, do not do that to me!”

“Eren.” Armin looked a bit panicked, although what a dead person had to be worried about anymore was beyond Eren. “Touch my hand.”

Eren boggled at Armin's outstretched fingers. “Uh, I hate to break this to you, Armin, but you're kind of a ghost.”

“Just trust me, Eren. I've been thinking about this and I have a theory.” Eren only stared at Armin's hand, eliciting a huff of impatience. “Eren, what do you see when you look at me?”

“Oh.” Eren blinked, totally clueless as to where this was going. “Blond?”

Armin just stared at Eren and shook his head in wonder. “No, Eren. I mean how do I appear to you? See-through, fuzzy.”

“Solid. Real. Why?”

“Because the living don't look solid to us, Eren. They're like figments, like ghosts themselves. We see things through a curtain, a fog. But you?” Armin took a step closer to Eren, with his palm upturned. “You're a lighthouse. You're foundation and brick and light. And if you could touch us, feel us, just imagine what you could do with that gift.”

Eren couldn't imagine how that could be useful, but his curiosity was peaked. He swallowed, his throat tight, as he slowly reached forward.

Gingerly, so carefully, he touched his fingertips to Armin's.

Eren gasped and pulled back, a smile of wonder on his face as he stared at Armin. “You feel like electricity. Like energy. Holy shit, Armin, you feel real.”

A distant, piercing scream cut through the conversation. Eren didn't think twice before dashing past Armin, out the door, and down the hall.
He squealed to a halt at the sight of Levi crushing a cross into Annie's sizzling forehead. Mouth agape, Eren stood in the doorway, witness to Annie writhing back into the couch, her skinless face contorted into pain and horror. Jean was across the room, leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest and his face sober, sad. But not surprised.

Mikasa's voice came from the corridor; it sounded like she was on the phone. Her voice was cool and collected, and again, not particularly alarmed. “Dr. Zoe? Yes, it's Mikasa. It's happened again. Annie. Yes. Thank you.”

Was no one freaking out? Everybody in this house was fucking nuts!

There was a hand on his shoulder, and Eren peered over to see Mikasa. She dispassionately watched Levi lean forward and whisper a prayer in Annie's ear, not flinching when another howl of despair reverberated against the walls.

Quietly, Mikasa said, “Annie can't leave. She's forever susceptible. A broken dam that just keeps flooding.”

“Can't anybody do anything?”

Mikasa looked pointedly at Eren. “What on earth could we possibly do, Eren? No one is equipped for this. Levi and the rest an only do damage control.”

That couldn't be right. Eren narrowed his eyes at Annie's twisted form, watched that slick, muscled face contort. There was a dark shroud over her features that flickered in and out of visibility. Like Annie's reflection, but black, dark, stuck to her skin like a shifting bruise. Eren couldn't place it, could barely explain it himself.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Eren stepped into the room and dropped to his knees at the edge of the couch.

“The fuck are you doing, Jeager?” Levi hissed, picking up a foot – he was still in his gym uniform, and Levi's sneaker smushing against Eren's cheek, pushing him away, wasn't particularly pleasant. “Move! Do you want to get hurt?”

“Do you see that?” Eren said at a whisper, barely audible over Annie's constant wails. “That shadow around her?”

“What – no. Shut up. Fuck, leave, you're in the way you braindead brat!”

Eren didn't feel like himself. He felt like he was drifting towards Annie, like he didn't have as much control of the hands reaching out for her.

“Eren!” Levi snapped.

“Shut the fuck up, Levi, and leave me alone!” Eren didn't even look for a reaction, just lunged with both hands for that black, twitching shadow. He didn't know exactly what he was doing, but Armin's words echoed in his head.

*If you could touch us, feel us, just imagine what you could do.*

Hands around Annie's neck, Eren felt that hum, that electricity he'd recognised from Armin. Although this time the buzz made him nauseous, sick. Armin's energy had made him feel giddy – this made Eren felt like spewing tar.
His palms burning like grabbing a livewire, Eren closed his eyes and felt. Not Annie, not the true flesh, but the shadow, darkness, black lightning.

And he yanked.

Twin screams resounded in Eren's ears, and he was distantly aware that one was his. Then a bleak chasm sucked him in, and there was silence.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Somehow I ended up writing 5k in one day. So, uh, here you go. LOVE YOU GUYS WITH THE HEAT OF A TITAN'S STEAMING, DECOMPOSING CARCASS.

Wincing out of sleep, Eren was first struck by that fucking ringing in his ears. He couldn't seem to wake up without it.

Shifting to roll over, Eren grunted when something heavy weighed down his legs, stopping him from moving. Groaning softly, he lurched to a sitting position, fingertips rubbing his temples as he did so.

And then he saw Levi sleeping awkwardly in a chair, his head pillowed atop his arms, on Eren's legs.

Eren's hands dropped limply to the bedspread as the memories of Armin, Annie, and the rest washed over him in brutal, slapping tidal waves.

Christ, what had he done? Eren didn't have the first clue.

What he did know was that has actions had conspired to leave him in bed while a certain mysterious exorcist used his lap for a pillow.

Levi looked young this way. Or, even more youthful than he normally appeared. The lace curtains covering the window at the head of Eren's bed distilled the sunlight across Levi's face, the intricate design scattering across his reposed features. The dark circles remained heavy beneath the inky curve of lashes, and it made Eren wonder how long Levi had been at his bedside.

Nurse Nightingale he wasn't, but Levi did obviously care for the people under his supervision.

“Hey,” Eren said quietly, reaching out to tentatively brush aside the dark hair veiling Levi's face.

Levi's eyes snapped open, as if he hadn't been sleeping at all. For a moment, he was still, meeting Eren's unsure gaze with his own composed one.

“How are you?” Levi said, his gravely voice betraying how tired he was. He sat up and smoothed out his hair, his shadowed gaze never parting from Eren.

Eren frowned and scratched his head, felt that his hair was a mess and probably looked like a bird nest. “Fine?”

“You have a seriously fucked up definition of 'fine'. But, if you say so, let's get down to business.”

“Busin- ah!” Eren yelped as Levi pinched Eren's ear and wrenched him forward by his sharp grip.

“How are you?” Eren exclaimed as Levi's face came into focus, his breath hot against his ear.

“Ow ow ow, Jesus f-”

“If you ever tell me to shut the fuck up again, your pretty ass will be out on the pavement before you have time to even try and be some stupid fucking hero. Understood?”
“Whatever – ah! Fine, fine!”

Levi let go, but not before he gave Eren's ear one last vicious twist. “Good.” Lounging back in his seat, Levi crossed his legs and folded his hands atop his knees. “Second – how did you do that?”

“I – what?” Eren was busy biting back a whimper and rubbing his ear. At least the ringing had been replaced by a burning. “Do?”

“It's like talking to a fucking parrot. Eren, what you did to Annie -”

Eren scooted from the bed and bought his feet to the floor, leaning into Levi's space with wide, expectant eyes. “Did it work?”

Levi's pause had Eren going white with dread. Then Levi sighed and shrugged. “Yes.”

Eren's face lit up. “Yes?”

“Polly want a cracker?”

Eren chose to ignore that and barely contained himself from bouncing with glee on the bed. “I did it? I pulled it out?”

“Is that what you did?”

Pursing his lips in thought, Eren nodded. “Pretty much, I think. That's what I tried to do, anyway.”

“It looked like you were strangling her.”

“Well, if I do it again I won't try for the neck first. Maybe there's a better spot.”

“What the hell makes you think you're going to do it again, Jeager?”

“Um.” Eren shifted on the bed, looking down at his knees, unable to meet that viper stare Levi sometimes had. “Annie's okay, right?”

“Yes.”

“And what I did worked, right?”

“Presumably.”

“So, why not do it again? Make myself useful. Surely she's not the only one you know who has... similar problems.”

Eren noted Levi's jaw clenching, the muscle near his neck twitching. “Eren, do you know how long you've been out?”

Eren scrunched his nose. “This feels like deja vu.”

“Almost twenty-four hours.” Levi said it like it carried weight, like it meant something.

“So what?”

“So, you think you can just go around, what, pulling demons out of people and then promptly pass the fuck out for a day or more from the strain it puts on your body?”

Eren was silent for a long moment. He wondered if Levi had ever been in a staring contest, because
he would definitely be the champion. “Well, I mean, wouldn't it be worth it?”

“At what cost?”

Eren shrugged. “Maybe this is the thing I've been waiting my whole life to be good at.”

Levi's expression was probing, looking for something that Eren couldn't place. Finally he said, “Don't be stupid.”

Watching Levi stand and make for the door, Eren inclined his chin and took a calming breath. “I'm not.”

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Eren was starting to think that it was pretty pathetic the way he considered being able to shower and get dressed without any drama to be an accomplishment. The manner in which these past days had unfolded, he'd be happy to make it to lunch without a ghost jumping out at him.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Eren decided to avoid the kitchen and dining room. His appetite was practically nil despite not having eaten in a day, so he didn't have any business there. Plus, he was still feeling a bit shaken and uninterested in socialising at the moment.

He stealthily bypassed the chatter, pleased to hear Annie talking about getting a spot on the soccer team, as if she were just a normal high school girl. He heard another female voice – an adult, whom he couldn't place. But he wasn't interested in finding out the details, just now.

Eren slipped out the back door and onto the porch, a smile blooming as he found the sun shining and the grass green and lush. Without hesitation, he headed out to the yard and simply collapsed on the grass like a starfish.

When Eren was a kid, he used to lay in the garden for hours. Watching clouds, birds, listening to dogs barking the distance, daydreaming. He'd had a really shitty temper on him as a child; one that he'd struggled with all the way through his teenage years. Being alone and kind of meditating to the hot beat of the sun on his closed eyelids, the dreamlike drift of the clouds on the wind all helped simmer his blood.

After a good half hour of coasting on sunshine bliss, Eren could feel his face start to fry a little. He'd go tan, no doubt. A deep caramel of which his mother had always claimed she'd been jealous. Eren had always been told he'd looked like his mother, although what really set them apart was her natural grace. Eren was about as graceful as Dumbo.

God, he missed her.

Would seeing her spirit, talking with her feel better or worse? Eren couldn't decide.

“Eren?” Mikasa said quietly, not enough to startle him. “Why are you crying?”

Sitting up, Eren roughly brushed the tears from his cheeks and shrugged. “I dunno. Sorry.”

“Can I do anything?” she said, sitting down on the grass across from him. The sunlight reflected blue off the pure black of her hair.

“Nah.” Eren offered a small smile. Despite the daily insanity that this house had going for it, at least the people living inside of it cared about each other. “Thanks. What're you doing out here?”
“We were all wondering where you went. I think Annie wants to thank you.”

“She doesn’t need to do that.”

“She'll want to anyway. And our resident doctor is here, too. She wants to give you a check up.”

“Yeah, no thanks to that.”

Mikasa's lips curved faintly. She inclined her chin and looked to the sky. “Cloud watching?”

“My mom always said it was good for the soul.”

“Maybe I should try it sometime, then.”

Eren murmured a noise of agreement that ended on a jaw-cracking yawn.

“Still tired?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Mikasa tilted her head as she studied him. “Would you like to lay your head on my lap?”

Eren's eyes widened. “Uh. Mikasa, I don't – I mean I'm not attracted to -”

Chuckling, Mikasa shook her head, her teeth flashing with a sincere smile. “Stupid. I just mean you look tired and after all you've done for the people in this house, you deserve someone to take care of you a little.”

“Oh. But what about your touch-know thingie?”

Mikasa patted her thighs. “The jeans will keep me safe. As long as I don't touch you with my hands, we're good. Come on, Eren, relax.”

Eren didn't need to be told twice. He shifted and stretched back out on the grass, his head comfortably pillowed on Mikasa's lap. He looked up at her and grinned a silly grin, and she seemed to swallow a laugh that still reflected in her dark eyes.

“Y'know,” Eren said quietly, letting his lids fall shut. “The last time I did this I was probably like ten, with my mom.”

“Your mother's passed away, right?”

“Yeah, when I was eleven.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Me too.”

“If you don't mind my asking, how did it happen?”

“I -” Eren frowned. “I don't know the details. She was sick. Somehow. My memory is really bad about that time in my life. My therapist later on had called it denial or whatever, and Dad won't talk about it.”

They were silent for a long time, Eren drifting, floating on the steady sound of Mikasa's breathing.

“Where are you parents?” Eren asked, eventually.
“They were killed in a robbery when I was a child,” Mikasa said easily, as if that didn't affect her at all.

Eren popped his eyes open and looked into hers. “Shit. That's awful.”

“I was in the foster system after that. Started working when I was fifteen, took whatever jobs I could, saved saved saved for college. When I was legally independent I slept on the couch of a friend while working and going to school. And then whole... thing happened. And now I'm here.”

“At least you're not alone here.”

Mikasa's smile didn't reach her eyes, and she looked away into the distance. “For now.”

Eren sat up suddenly, his face close to Mikasa's. “When I get out of here – I mean, when we both eventually do – why don't we live together? I've basically got no one and neither do you. Um, I know we hardly know each other but -”

“Yes.” Mikasa said immediately, her eyes brighter than he'd ever seen them. “Okay. It's a deal.”

There was a cough from the porch. “Sorry to interrupt this little love-fest,” Levi said with zero intonation, “But the doctor is in and she wants to get her grubby hands on Eren.”

Eren groaned, but got to his feet, along with Mikasa. She went in and Eren trailed slowly behind her, dragging his feet. He hated doctors. His dad was a doctor.

“Jean's going to be jealous,” Levi said as he followed Eren.

Eren flashed a look over his shoulder. “What do you know?”

“I know what I see.”

“What you saw was called friendship.”

“Is that what it's called these days?”

Eren rolled his eyes, even though Levi couldn't see it. “Sorry, I don't swing that way. You're going to have to look for drama somewhere else.”

There was a pause as they trailed through the kitchen, towards the dining room. Levi's voice sounded a little tense as he said, “Well, I think I've found it now.”

Eren turned to squint at Levi, “What does that m-”

“Ohhh. My. Gaaawd!” A woman physically slammed into Eren, crushing him in a hug and picking him up to twirl him. “Here's my new best patient! A little light weight, though, aren't you?” She said as she plopped him down and gave the meat of his side a sharp pinch.

“Ow! Ow, what the hell – I mean who the hell?”

“You need to eat more, kid,” the woman said, pushing her glasses up her nose as she invaded Eren's space once more with wide eyes and a predator's grin. She looked fucking manic. “Wow. Oh wow. So, how do you feel? How did it feel? You know, it? The touching of the demons and the seeing the possession and -”

“Are you really a doctor?!” Eren could only back up far enough – he eventually hit a wall and then the panic set in. He looked to Levi, disinterested – to Mikasa, pitying him – to Jean, laughing at him
– to Annie, resigned for him.

Was no one going to rescue him?

Apparently not even listening to Eren, the lady squinted at Eren's face. “You're not getting enough sleep.”

Jean said, “His way of sleeping usually means fainting -”

“Passing out -”

“And just falling asleep afterwards.”

“And what makes you faint?” she asked Eren, nose to nose.

Eren shrunk back a little. “Um, I at least know a person's name before we get up-close and personal.”

To Eren's numb shock, Levi actually chuckled and looked to the ceiling, as if to collect himself.

The woman cocked her head like a confused animal, then beamed and stuck out a hand, grabbing Eren's to shake it too enthusiastically. “Dr. Zoe Hanji, but I hate Zoe, so everyone calls me Hanji. Okay, introductions are over, can you strip for me?”

Eren's jaw dropped, his palms jumping up in front of him as if to fend off Hanji's advances.

“Aw, now, don't be shy, it's nothing I haven't seen before.” Hanji was on Eren before he could run, her hands gripping the hem of his t-shirt and pulling up.

Eren's shriek was anything but masculine as he stumbled back, his shirt going with Hanji. Feeling his ears burn like the sun, Eren just gaped.

“Alright, Hanji,” Levi said, strolling up to them looking a bit too pleased with himself. “I've let you scare the shit out of the kid. Why don't you calm the fuck down, sit, and act like a professional for once in your life?”

It took some effort, but Eren managed to wrangle his shirt back from Hanji and redress, while he, Hanji, and Levi made their way to the library, where it would be most private.

The check-up that followed was fairly standard, and Eren could deal with that. Then the questions came regarding what he'd seen and what he'd done, and he managed to stumble though concise replies as he could manage.

“Well,” Hanji said as she looked down at her notebook and scribbled something more. “You seem pretty healthy and boringly normal to me, underweight and sleep deprived as you are.”

Right about now, Eren couldn't be happier to be considering boring. He just nodded.

Hanji sighed. “Which doesn't explain how you accumulated such a wealth of gifts. Most people who go though exorcisms come out worse for wear, but they get better, and eventually they head off on their way. Then there are people like Annie, who just can't seem to close up their wounds. Then there's Mikasa. In my opinion, her talent is fading more by the month. She may even lose it altogether by the end of the year.”

“And me?” Eren said. A flicker of hope had sparked when Hanji had spoken of Mikasa.
“And you.” Hanji’s eyes glinted as she set aside her notepad and looked at Eren like he was dinner. “You, Eren, are something else altogether. Do you know if any of your family members are gifted?”

Eren couldn't help but laugh. “Definitely not. Unless you mean academically gifted.”

“What do you parents do?”

“My mom passed away when I was young and my dad is a doctor.”

“His field?”

“Something that keeps him in labs most of the time,” Eren said with a shrug.

“So, no crazy psychic grannies or whatever?” Hanji asked, looking crestfallen.

“Hanji,” Levi said, speaking for the first time since they'd entered the library. He'd been silent for a good hour, just monitoring, his attention barely leaving Eren's face. “You've got a theory?”

“I do. It's been my experience that gifted people come from gifted families. Even Mikasa had mentioned that her mother was of Romani origin and her great-grandmother used to read palms, fortunes, tarot cards – all that jazz. And that's child's play in comparison to Eren, here. I have a hard time believing that a mere possession just invented these gifts for him. People who come out of exorcisms with an altered kind-of third eye? I postulate that they've had it all along – they just needed something to open it.”

Eren self-consciously rubbed his forehead. “Well, I don't know anything about any third eyes in my family.”

Hanji waved him off. “Later. For now -” she clapped her hands together and rubbed them eagerly. “Experiments.”

Eren nearly wept with joy when Levi cut in.

“Let's save the experiments for another day, freakball.”

Hanji pouted, but nodded in agreement, looking down to write some more notes.

Standing, Levi looked to Eren and motioned to be followed. “Come on, Jaeger, let's work on that underweight bullshit.”

There was a crash and both Eren and Levi whirled around to see Hanji standing with deviant glee, the force with which she’d left the chair having completely knocked the furniture over.

“Jaeger?”

“Yes?” Eren frowned.

“As in Dr. Grisha Jaeger?”

“My father,” Eren eeked out, feeling his stomach lurch.

“Oh. My. Gawd.”

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Hanji had quickly excused herself, claiming she had to make some calls and do some research before
she could properly deal with Eren. After she'd discovered who Eren's father was, the game had appeared to change. Except Eren didn't know what game they were playing, or any of the rules. He might as well have been participating blindfolded.

That night, they had a goodbye dinner for Jean.

According to the House Rules of Levi, only healthy food was ever allowed in these walls, but as a going away treat, Jean could have anything they wanted. And that's how they ended up actually getting to go out to a local pizza place together.

Having been confined to the house for days now, Eren couldn't help the wide smile of pleasure that fixed upon his face. Despite it being a goodbye to Jean, everyone was in good spirits – even Levi, who muttered about pizza being humanity's downfall.

The evening summer air was mild and breezy, so the lot of them had decided to walk. The main street of the small suburb wasn't far. When Eren had first arrived in the house and they'd had dinner together at the table, he'd asked where they actually were, because he'd realised he hadn't a clue. It had turned out he was just two towns over, and it made Eren wonder how such a bizarre house could be sat in such a mundane place.

Eren was sandwiched between Annie and Levi, the round table making their group feel more intimate than it already was. Leaning an elbow on the table, Eren plopped his cheek on his palm and studied Annie.

“You sure you're okay?”

Annie rolled her eyes, looking put-upon in that way only teenagers could. “Yes. Thanks. Again.”

Eren waved off the thanks and leaned in to hear her better over the raucous of their table, plus the boisterous jukebox not far from them. “And I heard you got accepted onto the soccer team for the fall term yesterday?”

Annie's lips curved, but she shrugged like it was no big deal. “Yeah. First string.”

“What position?”

“Forward.”

“Yeah? I was a midfielder.”

Annie raised her eyebrows. “You played?”

“Hell yeah, I did. From age eight to eighteen. I have all the shitty plastic trophies in a cardboard box to prove it,” Eren said with a grin. “I was always the midfielder, although when the coach hated me for being an aggressive dick on the field, he'd put me in as goalie so I'd get some painful balls to the face.”

“Woaaah!” Jean chimed in from across the table. “I'm sorry, I must have listened in at the wrong moment, Jeager. Are you telling a poor little highschool girl about some dude's balls in your face?”

“You are disgusting on so many levels,” Annie said drolly. “There could be a graph on it.”

Eren flipped Jean the bird. “Suck a dick, Seabiscuit.”

“You wish,” Jean said with a grin.
Mikasa just quietly laid her forehead on the table as if she were forever done with life, and everyone burst into laughter.

Wiping away tears of mirth, Eren screeched back from his seat. “I'm gonna pick out some songs. Any requests?”

“Nothing cheesy,” Annie said.

“No offensive rap,” Mikasa added.

“Offensive rap!” Jean said.

Eren snorted a laugh and turned away, heading for the front of the restaurant and to the jukebox.

He chewed on his lip and flipped idly through songs, his hips bopping slightly to the pop song that was already on.

“Hey,” said a warm voice that was too close.

Eren jumped a bit and looked over – and up. The guy was tall and blonde. And buff. And pretty hot.

Eren smiled. “Hi. You want me to move? I can pick songs after you.”

“Your songs are on me,” the guy said, leaning one hip on the jukebox as he leaned in to speak over the rising noise of the busy restaurant.

“Huh?” Eren laughed and shook his head. “I'm alright, thanks. What if I played songs that you hated and then you wasted your money on me?”

“If you liked it, then I don't think it would be a waste.”

Eren could feel his cheeks begin to heat. “Well, uh, I have strict orders from my table for nothing cheesy and no offensive rap.”

The guy's smile looked genuine. “My name's Reiner.”

“That's a cool name, I've never heard it before. I'm Eren.”

“Hi, Eren.” Reiner's eyes lingered on him, then flicked to the jukebox. “Well, at least let's look through together and if I like what you choose, it'll be on me.”

“Queen,” Eren said immediately. “I really like Queen.”

“Good choice. I think I like y-”

“There are some people who want to actually want to listen to music, here,” Levi's voice interrupted sharply.

Eren's flicked a glance to Levi, and even though he was slouched with his hands shoved in the pockets of his charcoal slacks, he looked twenty times more dangerous than the brawny Reiner.

Reiner raised his eyebrows and made a point of looking down at Levi. “Sorry?”

“You should be. Move, jockstrap.”

Reiner's face went red with something that certainly wasn't embarrassment – something a whole lot more violent. He opened his mouth to speak when Eren stepped in between them, facing the taller of
the two. He smiled apologetically, “Songs are on me. I'll see you around, Reiner.”

A pregnant pause stretched between them as Reiner looked between Levi and Eren. “I get it,” he said darkly and stopped away to a table full of other jock-looking guys.

Eren whirled around to Levi. “What the hell do you think you're doing?”

Levi flicked a brow. “The guy was practically drooling on your face. It was vile.”

“He was the most outside world social interaction I've had in days, Levi. Unlike you, I can't come and go as I please.”

“Don't be so dramatic,” Levi said as he went up to the jukebox, stuck a five dollar bill in the slot and picked a song.

“Dramat – wha – me? Me?” Eren's blood was fucking boiling, and at the same time was so perplexed and exasperated that he had no idea how to deal with this situation. “You're an epic dick, Levi. Just so you fucking know. Next time someone you like is trying to get into your pants, I'll stomp in and fuck it all up for you.”

“That would be surreal,” Levi muttered.

“What?”

“I said shut the fuck up and pick some songs, Jaeger.”

Eren gritted his teeth and sidled up beside Levi, aggressively slamming the button that turned the song pages. He was picking this and that in deep silence, when Levi spoke up.

“So that's your type? All muscle, no brains.”

“My type is someone who's good to me,” Eren said between gritted teeth.

“Right. Of course it would be.”

Well, do ya, do ya do ya wanna?

Well, do ya, do ya do ya wanna?

Well, do ya, do ya do ya wanna go,

Where I've never letcha before?

“Levi,” Eren said with a sigh. He turned, putting his weight against the jukebox as he folded his arms across his chest.

Levi rolled his eyes. “Christ, kid, you gonna try and chastise me or something? I was saving your ass. That guy was a dickhead. Anyone could see it from miles away.”

When I woke up tonight, I said I'm

Gonna make somebody love me,

I'm gonna make somebody love me.

And now I know, now I know, now I know,
I know that it's you.

You're lucky, lucky, you're so lucky!

“That's the thing. I'm not a kid. I can handle myself – have been doing so for a while now. It's obvious you're just doing your job with protecting me and all that, and I appreciate the sentiment because it shows the world you're not a soulless vampire -”

“Gee, thanks -”

“But I can deal with me,” Eren said, offering a small smile.

Levi looked away with apparent disinterest. “Not particularly well.”

“And that's where I have you. And I'm glad for it.” Eren felt his face heat suddenly and he swallowed, glancing at his feet. “I'm really happy to have you on my side.”

Levi was quiet, then he heaved a sigh and none-too-gently punched Eren's arm. “Knew you were fucking shit at reprimanding. You ended up complimenting me. Loser.”

Eren laughed as they started to walk towards the table. He shifted and shoved his body playfully against Levi's. “Look who's talking. What loser dresses up to go to fuckin' Pizza Hut?”

“This isn't dressing up. This is me looking incredible at all times.”

“You looked incredible in your stupid gym hair clips and sweatpants. Doesn't matter what -” Eren snapped his mouth shut, but it was already too late.

He'd never been more thankful for the interruption of Jean shouting obscenities at him as they reached the table. The rest of the meal went smoothly – aside from Eren being unable to meet Levi's eyes for any more than a split second.

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Eren murmured a pleased mmmm as they exited the restaurant, and the fresh night air enveloped them all. With his face tilted to the sky, Eren was unable to walk in a fully straight line and nearly wandered into Levi.

“Watch it,” Levi said, without heat, and reached to steady Eren. His hand lingered at Eren's elbow, then released.

“Sorry,” Eren said easily, feeling jovial now, despite his earlier fuck up. He was sure Levi hadn't thought anything of it, so why should Eren?

Everyone began to stroll down the sidewalk, towards the house. Jean walked between Mikasa and Annie, sharing some anecdote that had Mikasa and Annie shaking their heads. Which left Eren and Levi. Not that Eren minded. He was over the whole Reiner mishap – it wasn't like he'd been attached to the guy or anything.

“Levi?”

“Yeah?”
Eren stared straight ahead. “What do you think the deal was with Hanji recognising my dad – and my last name?”

“Who the hell knows with her. Although, maybe they know each other.”

“How could that be?” Eren said, looking to Levi with a frown.

Levi shrugged. “Erwin said that him and your dad were old friends.”

Eren stopped and turned, unconcerned with losing the rest of the group. “Erwin? As in the Father Smith guy you’d said exorcised me?”

“The one and only. What's the big deal about that? Don't shit your pants over it, kid.”

“But why the hell wouldn't have my dad told me that over the phone? What's their connection, and how do they relate to Hanji in the way that had made her so excited?”

“Woah woah woah, brat.” Levi’s hand returned to Eren's arm and lingered. “First off, calm the fuck down. Second, Hanji reacts to the strangest shit, okay? Who knows what insane connections she's made up in her twisted carcrash of a brain. Wait til she comes back and ask her yourself, okay? In the meantime, there's nothing you can do about it.”

Eren swallowed the lump in his throat and stared hard at his shoes. “Yeah.”

“Hey, look at me.”

Eren followed the order sharply. They locked eyes and Levi almost looked concerned for Eren, if it wasn't for the ever-present annoyance shadowing the expression.

“Breathe,” was all Levi said.

Eren eyes fluttered shut for a moment and he inhaled. Exhaled. He opened his eyes, meeting Levi's again. Whatever emotions they held now, Eren couldn't read a single word of them.

“Thanks,” he said softly.

“Don't mention it. Seriously. Don't.”

Eren’s laugh echoed down the street as they headed home, arms brushing the entire way.
Hey, friends! Thank you for all the brilliant, glittery reviews. I spend a lot of time rolling in them with glee. I'm sorry I haven't replied to some, though - I have a guest over for the weekend, so I'm a wee bit busy and have written this chapter between the hours of midnight and 2am tonight!

Think of this as an interval before Serious Shit happens. I'm sorry I'm not-sorry for the dialogue heavy chapter, but DIALOGUE IS LIFE, OKAY.

Please to enjoy my offering it you!

Breakfast was weird without Jean there. Even Eren could admit that. Jean had, of course, promised to visit – most likely to continue to hang on Mikasa's every word and action – but Eren felt the gap.

“T’m gonna be out late tonight,” Annie said as she pushed her chair back from the table. “The team are having a party at one of their houses.”

Levi looked up from his newspaper with an eyebrow raised. “Be careful,” was all he said.

“I know, I know.”

“If you begin to feel strange -”

“I got it.”

Eren pointed his cereal spoon at Annie. “Have fun.”

“What're you two, my crappy gay dads?” Annie said with an eyeroll, but as she left the table, Eren noted the brief curve of her lips.

“I would not be a crappy gay dad,” Eren said with a pout. “I'd be a cool dad.”

Mikasa chuckled. “Sorry, Eren, but I think we all know that there's very little that's cool about you.”

Eren put a hand over his heart. “Ouch, Mikasa. Ouch.”

Mikasa gave him a look, then smiled and shook her head.

“What about you, hubby dearest?” Eren said, slouching back in his chair as he aimed a grin Levi's way.

Levi met his gaze steadily and dropped his paper to the table, opting to bring his cup of coffee to his lips. “I'm an extremely good gay dad to you brats,” he said over the rim “You're all alive, aren't you?”

“What does alive but miserable count as?” Eren said teasingly.

“A normal upbringing,” Levi said flatly, returning to his paper.
Mikasa's cellphone buzzed on the table and she picked it up to read a text. A small laugh escaped. “It's Jean.”

“Loser miss us already?” Eren said, although he leaned with interest.

“Apparently he has so much homework from his time off that he's just decided drop his courses.”

“Whaaat? How the hell long has he been away?”

Mikasa gave Eren a baleful look. “Only the ten days.”

“And he's already quitting?”

Mikasa shrugged. “I always had the impression that he wasn't a fan of school in the first place. He was always talking to me about joining the Marines.”

Eren mulled that over and found the idea kind of appealing. It sure as hell sounded better than the life he'd been living before all of this mess. Maybe once he was out of here, that's what he'd pursue. Although at this point, his brain was spilling over with the possibilities his new gift opened up for him. Either path he pursued would lead to him helping humanity, at least.

“Why the ten days?” Eren found himself asking.

Levi replied from behind his paper. “That comes down from the Vatican. We've got procedure to follow with this shit. Technically, people can go through an exorcism and come out the other end fine. Most don't. Whether it's injuries sustained while possessed, or emotional trauma, there are factors that can leave a victim in a lot of pain and discomfort. And, of course, vulnerable to another attack.”

Setting the news aside, Levi leaned back in his chair and sighed. “Realistically, a lot of people don't need more than a week to physically heal from the worst of it all. Some people bounce back quickly and others don't. The ten days are a rule of thumb, a better-safe-than-sorry mindset.”

“So, Jean -”

“Healthy as a horse,” Mikasa said.

Eren gasped. “You didn't just make a horse joke. I'm telling Jean. He's gonna be a broken man.”

“Break it up, children,” Levi said mildly. “Ackerman, what're your plans for today?”

Mikasa tucked a thick lock of hair behind her ear. “I've got an online circulatory system test tomorrow, so I'll be in the library studying for most of the day. Why?”

“I was just checking who was being made to suffer this Sunday. Eren, looks like it's just you.”

Eren frowned and looked between the two of them. “What happens on a Sunday?”

“We clean.”

***

This was how Eren found himself standing on a ladder in the living room, taking the curtains off of their hooks, while Levi shoved all of the furniture towards the middle of the room to prepare for mopping around it.
“Is this really necessary?” Eren said, grunting as a loosened curtain fell over his head and veiled him like a Scooby Doo ghost. “Washing curtains? Who washes curtains?”

“Sane, hygienic people.”

Eren pulled off the curtain and let it pool at the base of the ladder as he gawked at Levi. “You think **sane** people take the curtains off every room in the house and wash them **every** week?”

“My house, my rules. How the hell do you think this place stays so clean?”

Eren considered this. “Now that you mention it, a couple of days ago, I *did* see you drop a piece of food on the floor and proceed to bleach the entire kitchen. You acted like the place should be in quarantine.”

“Shut up and get to the next room, Jaeger.”

“Yes, sir,” Eren said with a grumble.

If he was being completely honest, he didn't much mind this. He wasn't a neat freak in the sense that Levi was, but it was a big house with a lot of people living in it at any one time. It was bound to get grubby fairly quickly.

But that got Eren thinking, too.

About ten minutes later, he dropped another pile of curtains in the hall and went back to the front room. Levi had crisply rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt and popped the top two buttons at his collar. He mopped with sharp, efficient movements, his expression grave, as if battling dirt was a matter of life and death.

“So, is this really your house?”

Levi didn't stop cleaning. “Why?”

“It just doesn't seem to suit you.”

With a snort, Levi said, “You don't know anything about what suits me or not.”

“Maybe. But you didn't answer my question.”

“No.”

“No, you didn't answer my question or no, this isn't really your house.”

Levi huffed a short noise of frustration and paused, leaning against his mop as he shot a glare across the room. “The latter.”

“Oh.” Eren blinked. “So, who's house is this?”

“What's it to you?”

“Well, I'm living here. I think I deserve to know.”

Levi sighed and faintly shook his head. “It belongs to Erwin. Some passed down thing.”

Eren frowned. “Erwin? But I've been here for days and haven't seen him around.”
“He takes on more jobs that he used to.” Levi shrugged. “Because of me.”

“Because you quit doing exorcisms.”

“Wow, you're so smart. Thank you for spelling everything out to the class.”

Eren leaned against the doorway and folded his arms over his chest as he considered Levi. “So, this is Erwin's house, but you live here, too. And he's away on a job, which is why he didn't come to help you when Annie was possessed.”

“Telling me my life story? I'm fucking riveted.”

Eren cocked his head. “So, what would you have done if I hadn't pulled the demon out? Performed the exorcism yourself?”

“No,” Levi said dully. “I would have waited. For Hanji.”

Eren ran an impatient hand through his hair. “But I thought only, like... Fathers, or whatever, could do exorcisms. Wait.” Eren's eyes lit up. “Oh my god, are you Father Levi? I just realised this!”

Levi stared at him blandly. “You got a daddy kink, kid? Or just a religious one?”

“Ha-ha,” Eren said, looking away as he felt his neck flush up to his face. “You're not going to answer my question, are you?”

“You ask so many, I wouldn't know where to fucking start.”

“But, Hanji -”

“Does not follow anyone's rules, let alone those of a corrupt church,” Levi said. With that, he turned away and began his mopping once more.

“If it's so corrupt, why are you a part of it?”

“Because they saved me,” Levi said with such quickness, such surety that Eren could only stare at him in wonder.

“What – ahh!” Eren ducked as a wet mop flew through the air like a javelin and rammed him in the shoulder. “What the fuck, L -”

“Get your scrawny ass up those fucking stairs and collect all the curtains like I asked you to thirty damn minutes ago, you shitty little brat! And when you're done, wash the stairs, then run up and down them thirty times, then wash them again. Next time you wanna play twenty questions, I'm putting you on the roof and making you clean the fucking gutters.”

Needless to say, Eren did not ask any more questions for the rest of the day.

At least, until they sat down on the back porch with a sandwich and a beer.

“This doesn't taste like dumpster food,” Levi said of the food Eren had whipped up.

“Asshole. I've had to cook for myself for a long time now.”

“Composing a sandwich does an a cook make,” Levi said, and took another neat bite.

“Sooo -”
Levi's hand shot out and covered Eren's mouth. After chewing and swallowing, Levi said, “Do you want to clean the gutters?”

Eren was silent and Levi dropped his hand.

“So, is it ever you all alone in the house?”

“You a masochist, Jeager, because you're going to be punished for the rest of the day for this.”

“I mean, I guess it's never just you. Annie is around. Is she the longest person who has stayed with you? How many people do you guys put up in like a year?”

Eren watched with curiosity as Levi set his sandwich down on his paper plate, proceeded to pick up Eren's and put it up to Eren's lips.

“Eat.”

“Eh?”

“Shut up and eat or I will maim you in a place that ensures you'll never be able to procreate.”

Sighing, Eren took the food from Levi and began to eat in silence. This lasted an antsy five minutes or so for Eren, before he finally said, “Okay. Just one more question for the day. But you have to promise to answer or else I'll just keep asking more and more crap until the sun goes down.”

“Not promising you shit, kid.”

“Do you think I have it in me to do what you do?”

Eren looked at his sandwich, nervously picking off the crusts and throwing them down the porch steps and onto the lawn. Levi ate silently, and after a solid ten minutes, Eren realised that Levi had no intention of answering.

He didn't know what he expected, really. He'd never been good at much in his life, but this gift seemed to have been dropped in his lap, and Eren didn't want to let it rot. He didn't want to be useless. He didn't want to be invisible.

“You'd do it better,” Levi said quietly, his voice smooth and assured.

Eren felt his cheeks burn and his chest bloom with warmth. He hid a smile behind a sip of beer and happily remained quiet for the remainder of the afternoon.
Wow, over 2000 hits now! I know that isn't a lot in the scheme of things, but to me, every single one of those views means a lot to me. Thank you so much for sticking with the story. The next chapter will be long and extremely plot heavy, so WOO and YAY!

Thank you all for your comments and your support! Again, I am atomicblonde on Tumblr and I track the tag, 'fic: the strange and the usual'.

“I just realised something.” Eren said as they sat at the small kitchen island with glasses of iced tea. They'd cleaned the entire day away. Eren had dusted and polished nooks and crannies he hadn't known existed in this world, but it had been good to get active with all the furniture moving.

Levi looked about as relaxed as he could, too. His hooded eyes flicked over to Eren as he leaned an elbow against the countertop and propped his sharp chin upon his fist. “Enlighten me, brat.”

“It's Sunday.”

Levi stared, blinked, and with painful slowness, dropped his head onto the granite top with a groan. “I swear the demon took a chunk of your brain when it was exorcised from you.”

“I mean, it's Sunday,” Eren stressed. “Shouldn't you have gone to church?”

“Cleanliness is next to Godliness. My house is my church. Split a piece of wood, and he is there. Sweep the fuckin' floor, and he is there. Or whatever explanation will make you shut up.”

“God probably thinks you're a giant bag of dildos.”

“Well, I am here to help the gays in all of their nightly needs,” Levi said, deadpan as he lifted his head from the counter and sighed. “What the hell do you want from me, kid?”

“For one thing, you can stop calling me 'kid'. Second, I want to start going to church and I want you to come with me.”

“No deal,” Levi said immediately, taking a long, slow sip of his tea.

“To which part?”

“The part where I stopped listening, so all of it, I guess.”

“Oh, come on, Levi,” Eren said. Not one to avoid using emotional blackmail when necessary, Eren folded his arms on the counter and laid his cheek on them, looking across the island at Levi with his most pathetic expression. “I don't want to go alone. I don't know how that shit works. There's like, standing and sitting and prayers I don't know, and then you eat a cracker -”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Jeager, have you ever even been inside a church? I'm actually growing concerned that you might get struck down on the steps of the first church you walk up to.”
“Well, I mean, I was baptised. But I don't remember it.”

“I -” Levi gawked for a brief second, then resorted to shutting his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. “I am speechless.”

“That's not a no.”

“Why are you so persistent about this?” Levi asked, his mood suddenly dropping to something heavy and serious. His gaze cut into Eren like keen blades. “What're you hoping to get from all of this?”

“I-I just... I just want to know what it's all about. God, and spirits, demons, faith. They're all connected, aren't they?”

Levi's slid a glance to the side. “Don't be too sure, kid. The older you get, the more mixed up it all becomes.”

Eren crossed his arms over his chest and inclined his chin with a stubborn set to his jaw. “Well, whatever. How the hell am I expected to be like you if I don't look into religion?”

There was a minute-long staring contest from across the counter as they exchanged equally steely glares.

Finally, Levi rolled his eyes and slumped in his chair. “Fuck.”

“Yesss,” Eren said with a smile that hurt his face.

“But I'm only going to say this once, and don't you dare fucking repeat it to Erwin or anyone else.” Levi leaned in, his expression sober and his grey eyes flickering with something strange. “I don't think you need religion to be an exorcist.”

Eren frowned. “Eh? But -”

“I don't mean normal people, Jeager. I mean you, specifically. Priests use scripture, symbolism, and faith to perform exorcisms. Before this, your religion was, what?”

“Uh.” Eren blushed. “Agnostic?”

“Of fucking course it was. And yet you just strolled up and KO'ed a demon like that,” Levi said, snapping his fingers to emphasize the point. “No God, no cross, just you.”

“So, what you're saying -”

“Is that even if I lost my faith in the church, I'd still have faith in you.”

Eren's breath caught in his throat, his fingertips curling into his fists as he openly gawked at Levi with a face that burnt like the sun.

“Okay, then,” Eren said with a rasp. His voice sounded hollow and mechanical in his ears. He stood up stiffly, unable to meet Levi's eyes. Eren wasn't under the misconception that Levi's words were anything more than what they sounded, but Eren couldn't remember anyone ever believing in him. Never. The feeling left him on cloud nine, and he had no idea what to do with that. “Gonna go shower now,” Eren muttered. “Being your Sunday slave leaves me dirty as hell.”

He hadn't considered the words until they were out of his mouth. But if Levi's expression was any indication, they'd both realised the same insinuation at the same time.
“Kay, thanks, bye,” Eren said as he rushed out the room, inwardly praising himself for not breaking out into a run.

After a long shower that dragged on due to embarrassment and not cleanliness, Eren yanked on loose plaid pyjamas and a band t-shirt. He did notice that he had to tie the drawstring extra tight, and made a mental note that he really did have to eat more. His hip bones probably should not be that prominent.

It was also then that Eren realised that he missed the gym. Not working at the gym, but working out there. He'd liked to keep a level of fitness and this week that had obviously gone downhill. Maybe this evening he'd have a go at some of the equipment – and, hopefully, sweat out some of his sheer, inherent awkwardness.

Wandering downstairs, Eren heard the television on, and followed it's sound. He found Mikasa curled up on the couch watching some procedural crime show that involved more gore than Eren cared for.

Hearing his approach, Mikasa glanced up and smiled. “You look like a teenager like that.”

“Like what?” Eren said, self-consciously running a hand through his damp hair.

Mikasa shook her head, her lips still curved. “I don't know. There's something about you. Must just be the eyes with all that messy hair.”

Eren frowned and came in to perch on the arm of the couch. “My eyes are just eyes.”

“Your eyes are definitely not just eyes. They're like... Disney prince eyes.”

“Oh. Oh.” Eren screwed his face up and gagged, making as if he were going to puke. “That's disgusting, Mikasa. Never say that again.”

“It's true,” Levi said from the doorway, startling Eren into shooting to his feet. Levi's smirk was slight and his posture relaxed. “You look like a Disney prince that fell into a blender and stumbled out with permanent brain damage.”

“That is -” Eren stumbled over his words. “Like, really rude. I'm pretty sure. Ugh.” Eren threw his hands up. “I don't like either of you. And I was going to cook you guys dinner.”

“I remain dubious,” Levi said.

“Well, then, I'll just have to prove you wrong,” Eren said, making a show of turning his nose up and stomping out of the room. “You'll eat your words and my lasagne.”

In the distance he could hear Mikasa say, “Is it just me, or does he get less cool by the day?”

“Prince in a blender,” Levi said.

“I heard that!”

***

Dinner had been a smash hit, although the table had felt extra lonely without Annie. Eren couldn't remember the last time he ever missed his father around mealtimes, and yet he already felt attached to the people in this house. He didn't want to think of how he'd cope when he'd eventually have to leave.
Mikasa had volunteered to clean up and do the dishes, and so Eren thought it would be an ideal time to properly check out the gym. As far as he could tell, Eren was the only one who wasn't making use of it. Mikasa always had a morning run, Annie lifted weights, and Levi did whatever the hell Levi did. The only thing Eren had ever seen him do was the barbell deadlift. Levi always had the door closed, anyway.

Probably because he always wore those hairclips.


Eren frowned, realising Levi was probably in his bedroom, which was still strictly off-limits. Well, everyone deserved their privacy. He went back into the kitchen and swung up beside Mikasa.

“Heya, can I borrow some of your work out clothes? My dad never packed me any and Levi’s not around for me to ask him for some.”

Mikasa shrugged. “Yeah, of course. Bottom drawer of the wardrobe in my room. In the future, you don’t need to ask.”

“Saviour!” Eren said with a grin, earning himself a big splash of water down his shirt from the sink. He quickly exited the room before it turned into a water fight and went to dig up Mikasa’s clothes. They were far from the same height, but Eren found a pair of basketball shorts that barely reached the top of his knees, and picked out what seemed like a fairly unisex sleeveless black top that fitted tightly to his frame, but did the trick. He got his iPod and sneakers from his room, laced up, and jogged downstairs with a spring in his step.

A sweaty session in the gym was exactly what Eren needed. Putting on his upbeat, pop-music heavy gym playlist, Eren stretched in long, lithe moments. He felt his body come to life beneath his skin, the aches and bruises and stress of the past days seeping from his muscles as he limbered up and got his blood flowing.

Starting at an easy jog on the treadmill, Eren hummed cheerfully under his breath. In mere minutes, his mind had slipped into that blissful abyss where no thought crossed his mind and his body simply took over.

When his legs begin to beg for it, Eren upped the speed and incline, until he was practically sprinting up a mountain. His thighs burned and his calves rebelled, but Eren felt fucking godly.

Time was lost to him, and Eren never even glanced at the progress reported on the screen before him. He stared straight head into nothing, sucking in breath and running for his life. Sweat cooled behind his knees and beaded at his nape and back. Without pausing the run, Eren whipped his shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

It was when his legs were beginning to lose their feeling that Eren knew it was time to bring the run to a close. He brought the treadmill to a slow jog again, breathlessly singing, “Shoot me dooown, but I won't faaall. I am titaaaanium!”

Glancing in the mirror for the first time since he’d come in, Eren yelped in surprise when he saw Levi lifting weights at the other end of the room. Their eyes met in the mirror and Levi just raised an eyebrow and continued to do bicep curls with a barbell that probably weighed as much as a five year old.

Eren cut his cool down short – the gym goer in him guilted him over that, but went ignored – and shut down the treadmill. He hopped off, his legs feeling like jelly as he ripped out his headphones.
and said between panting breaths. “How long have you been here?”

“Since your spritely rendition of Kelly Clarkson's 'What Doesn't Kill You’.”

Eren knew it wasn't the workout that was leaving his face red. “Oh my god.”

“Although, I have to say that 'Poker Face' was probably my favourite.”

Eren's face was anything but poker right now. By the way Levi was coughing back a laugh, Eren was positive he looked as mortified as he felt. He stood there, breath heaving, utterly speechless.

“Oh, well -”

“At least you have a decent singing voice.” Levi switched hands with the barbell. “I didn't want to interrupt.”

“Oh huh,” Eren said doubtfully, and decided to just ignore his embarrassment as best as possible and get on with his stretches. He set his feet shoulder-width apart and leaned forward, grabbing his ankles and dropped his head nearly between his knees. “You just wanted blackmail material. If that somehow gets on the internet – or, worse, in Jean's hands – I don't care if you've got God on your side, we're going head to head.”

Eren stood to his full height, blinking owlishly when he noted Levi was just staring at him mutely, having stopped his bicep curls in mid-rep.

“What?” Eren side, swiping his hair back with a damp hand, distantly noting in the mirror that it was now sticking up with sweat, as if he'd been electrocuted.

Levi blinked, then shook his head. “Kid, if we went head to head, you'd be on your knees in seconds.”

“Oh really, old man?” Eren said with a grin. He placed his hands on his hips and squeaked when they slid right off the sweat that clung to his bare skin. “Gross. You have a towel?”

Levi stared at him with restrained horror. “I wouldn't share a towel with you if there was a gun to my head.”

Eren rolled his eyes. “What a saint.” Grabbing his t-shirt from the floor, he wiped his face and chest down. On a whim, he threw the shirt at Levi, where it hit him square in the face, before dropping to the ground.

The expression the shirt uncovered on Levi was that of murder. With almost delicate grace, Levi set aside his barbell and made for Eren, cracking his knuckles as he approached. “Eren.”

“Ummm, Levi?” Eren held his hands up, palms out in defence as he took a step back. “Let's-let's not do anything too rash, okay?”

“Rash? Would you consider tossing your sweat-stained, floor-touching, disgusting shirt in my face as rash?”

“In retrospect?” Eren said, offering a smile.

Levi lunged forward, and before Eren could run, he found himself slammed into the ground, staring up at the ceiling as his shoulders screamed. Looming above him was Levi, standing over him with one foot on either side of Eren's hips. “Next time, you lose a limb.”
When Levi turned to leave, Eren swung a leg out, tripped him up, and watched with perverse pleasure as Levi ended up toppling to his back, too.

“You are -” Levi cleared his throat. “So very stupid.”

For a second, they both laid there, looking at the light fixtures.

“Hey, Levi?”

“What?” he snapped, but didn't move.

“Can I see all your tattoos?”

Levi coughed a sharp laugh. “I’d have to be naked for you to see all of them.”

“Oh. Nevermind.” Eren rolled and sat up, reaching his arms to the ceiling for a long, spine-arching stretch. The sweat was beginning to cool on his skin and he was starting to feel the chill. “One day will you tell me what they all mean?” he said, gesturing vaguely to Levi's exposed arms.

Levi lithely got to his feet and shrugged. “Depends on if you ever call me old man again.”

“Aw,” Eren said with a wide smile. “You know I don't think you're actually old.”

“I don't know anything.”

“Well, I don't think it. I don't know what age you are, but it doesn't really matter when you like someone, does it?”

Levi shot Eren with a prickly look. “Are you done in here?”

“Um.” Eren looked around. “Yes?”

“Then goodnight, Eren.”

“Oh. Goodnight-”

Levi's sweatpants pocket began to jingle. With a frown, Levi pulled his cell out, noted the caller ID and answered. “Yes? What, tonight? Yeah, fine, we'll be ready. See you then.”

“Who was that?” Eren said, immediately upon Levi hanging up. He got to his feet and collected his t-shirt, hearing Levi take a deep breath.

“Erwin's coming home.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Holy crap, guys! Over 200 kudos, nearly 3k hits, and 40 bookmarks!? I didn't think I'd even get this far. I'm genuinely so thrilled you're all with me on this journey. Thank you for all of the comments and reviews, they mean the world to me.

In other news, I'M LIKE SUPER DRUNK RIGHT NOW. I also wrote this entire chapter while under the influence, which definitely wasn't the wisest thing I ever did, but um... HERE IS A CHAPTER? IT IS LONGER? IT WOULD HAVE BEEN LONGER BUT IT SEEMED LIKE A GOOD STOPPING POINT.

LOVE.

PS DON'T THROW LIKE ROTTEN FRUIT AND VEG AT ME AFTER THE END OF THIS CHAP.
PPS I will edit it's horribleness when I am not hung over. So, later today.

The first reaction that hit Eren upon meeting Father Erwin was, *shit, not this again*.

Eren barely noticed the intimidating height of Father Erwin as he walked through the front door and greeted Levi first with a clap on the shoulder.

Because Eren had never seen a human being walking around with what looked like blackened, bruised handprints all over his clothes. Dozens of hands had held – or were still holding – on to this man, clinging to him with what looked to Eren like poisonous, lecherous, desperation. This guy looked like a fucking magnet for spirits – and from the slick, blackened tar that glistened on some of the prints, Eren was struck with the idea that these weren't Casper the Friendly Ghost types.


“*Uh.*” Eren zoomed in on Father Erwin's stark white collar, and the bruised print of hands around the Father's neck.

“Fuck, I swear he's not normally this braindead,” Levi said. He shot Eren with a look and gestured vaguely to Father Erwin, who stood with a patient expression. “You gonna get your head out your ass and greet him? This is the guy who saved you, so try and attempt a vague decorum of respect.”

“Hey,” Eren said flatly, giving a half-assed wave. He didn't know what to make of what he was seeing, and he didn't know whether it was worth saying. He also didn't trust Father Erwin as far as he could throw him – and the guy was like a skyscraper, so he wasn't going far.

If both he and Eren's father had decided to keep their relationship a secret - even from Eren, who was stuck in the midst of all this mayhem - then Eren would be reserving his judgement until some questions were answered.

“Hello, Eren. I'm glad to meet you properly this time. You look well.”
“He doesn't eat or sleep,” Levi said with vague annoyance, crossing his arms.

“I do too,” Eren said, lightly kicking Levi's ankle, and wondered why Levi had bothered to put on a suit again. They'd both showered and changed after Father Erwin's call and had sat in basic silence until midnight hit, and Father Erwin's sedate black sedan pulled up the driveway.

Father Erwin looked to Levi with surprisingly open affection. “Given the circumstances, I'd say that was normal. Eren would tell us if he was feeling particularly abnormal.” Father Erwin looked to Eren, his gaze honing in on his face. “You would tell us, wouldn't you?”

“Um, yeah, I guess,” Eren said with a shrug. “If it was important.”

“Oh, I have a feeling everything you experience is important,” Father Erwin said with faintly curved lips.

Eren fought back the shiver that slithered down his spine when he noticed a dark hand slide up from behind Erwin's back and lightly squeeze his shoulder. There was no one there, as if the dark, sickly miasma lurking behind Erwin had no particular shape, but for the hand.

Eren took a deep breath. “Then I should probably ask you a question.”

Father Erwin frowned. “Can we sit, first? Levi, make some tea.”

For a moment, Levi looked like he wanted to say no. He narrowed gaze dragged over Eren, searching for something. Then he wordlessly turned and made for the kitchen.

Eren and Father Erwin detoured into the dining room. Father Erwin led the way, his expansive back to Eren.

Nausea swamped Eren's stomach as he felt the blood seep from his limbs, leaving him like a useless ragdoll. Black claw marks littered Father Erwin's white dress shirt.

Reaching the table, they sat across from each other, Eren glad to give his weak knees a break. Father Erwin folded his hands upon the table and leaned in, his expression quietly curious. “So, your question?”

“Do you get regular back aches?” Eren said quietly, meeting Father Erwin's eyes with as much confidence as he could muster.

Father Erwin laughed softly and shook his head. “Why are you asking?”

“Like, on your right side, specifically,” Eren said, remembering where the scorched black hand had stroked and smoothed and squeezed. “Along your neck and stuff.”

Thick, dramatic eyebrows furrowed. “How did you know?”

“You have, uh -” Eren realised he didn't know how to explain it. He was going to have to work on it. Unfortunately, these experiences only came up sporadically, and always left Eren stiff and dumb with shock. Taking a deep breath, Eren collected his thoughts. He watched Levi come in with a tray of china cups and turned his head to tune Levi out.

“You have things all over you, sir.”

“You'll have to be more specific,” Father Erwin said, appearing as if he were struggling with his expression. Maybe he was trying not to look at Eren like he was an escaped mental patient.
“You've got company,” Eren said as simply as he could. “You're covered in them. They hang onto you sometimes – this one in particular, who hands off your neck and shoulder. I don't know if it's the same one that claws your back, but -”

“Company – them? Are you talking about -”

“Ghosts,” Eren said with a nod. “Or, uh, something. I don't have very good words for what I see. Sorry.”

“No need to apologise, Eren. I'm grateful you told me.” Father Erwin's eyes sharpened as he leaned in, across the table. “Can you tell me exactly what you see?”

Screeching his chair back, Eren stood, ignoring the tea that had been placed in front of him. His stomach felt like a churning, greasy pit and he didn't want to upset it further. Flicking his attention to Levi, he found his look returned – although Levi looked almost concerned for him.

Eren came up beside Father Erwin and began you point. “You have handprints here, here, here, here... and here. You have strangle marks on your neck and...” Eren looked behind Father Erwin and counted. “Seven claw marks on your back. And before – earlier, when you walked in – something was hanging off your shoulder. But it was hiding behind you so I couldn't see much of anything.”

When Eren stopped speaking, he noticed that both Father Erwin and Levi were simply staring at him as if he were speaking a long dead language.

Feeling his cheeks heat, Eren shrugged. He looked down at Father Erwin and placed his hands on his hips. “Now that I've answered your questions, you can answer one of mine.”

Father Erwin looked like a fairly perplexed goldfish with the way his mouth moved and nothing came out. Finally, he clamped his lips tight and gave a curt nod.

Eren nodded too, a deep frown engraved across his features. “Good. So you can tell me what the connection is between you and my father, and how that led to my being here.”

“That's a topic best left for the morning, don't you think?” Father Erwin replied smoothly.

Eren clenched his fists at his sides, but it didn't go unnoticed by him the way he swayed just a bit on his feet. The things he saw seemed to erode at his energy, leaving him weak and wobbly. Grinding his teeth, just a little, Eren gave a sharp nod.

“Tomorrow. First thing. I'm holding you to it.”

“I expect you will,” was all Father Erwin said.

Eren didn't even look at Levi as he muttered goodnight. For some reason, he felt anger bubbling just under the surface of his skin. He felt hot and aggravated, both by the trauma he'd just experienced and also by Father Erwin's apparently easy-going attitude. That guy was anything but.

Recognising that he was bone tired, Eren dragged his feet down the darkened corridor and towards the stairs. When the front door suddenly opened, Eren's exhaustion won out and he didn't even flinch in surprise.

Annie popped in and quietly shut the door behind her. She noted Eren in the hall and offered a small, warm smile.

“Waiting up, dad?”
Eren couldn't help but return the curve of lips. “Shut up. How was it?” He motioned for Annie to follow him upstairs as they spoke at a whisper, even if they really didn't have to.

“Good. Great, actually,” Annie said with a tinge of embarrassment to her voice, as if it wasn't cool to be excited about stuff like that. “Everyone on the team is nice. I didn't expect it.”

“More people are kind than not.”

Annie made a 'tsch' noise behind him as they climbed the stairs. “Not sure what reality you're living in, Eren, but I'd like to be a part of it.”

Eren chuckled and shrugged, turning to Annie as they reached the top landing. His mouth sobered. “Father Erwin's here.”

Without much of a reaction, Annie said, “I know. I saw his car out front.”

“Oh. So, what do you think of him? You've met him more times than any of us, I'm guessing.”

“Yeah. He was the person I originally lived with in the house.”

“Really?” Eren said, gawking just a little. He couldn't actually imagine living here with anyone but Levi.

“Mm. Levi was my exorcist and Erwin was the one staying in with us. He's alright. He's a good listener and stuff, I guess. Has a really cheesy, grandpa kinda sense of humour. He can't cook. He's fine, but I'd be careful what you say around him. He reads people so well, it gives me the fucking creeps.” Annie shrugged. “But maybe that's just me. Hey, I'm heading to bed.”

“Yeah. Okay,” Eren said hollowly, still processing what he'd been told. “'Night, Annie. You need anything, find me.”

Annie laughed soft and true as she rolled her eyes and turned away. “Sure, Dad.”

Eren headed to his own room, arms wrapping around himself as he cupped his knobby elbows. He sat on the bed and stared into nothing, just processing the evening.

Tomorrow. Answers came tomorrow.

After readying for bed, Eren slipped under the covers. He absently rubbed his ear, only mildly cognisant of the ringing in one ear. His thoughts were filled with ghosts, and the secrets that they held.

***

Eren woke up feeling epically hung over. He didn't know how or why, but his head was throbbing and he felt like he'd been dragged down the street, face down.

Groaning, he tossed the tangled sheets away and dropped his feet to the floor. Upon sitting up, the sunlight from the window glared into his eyes and Eren hissed, bringing his forehead down to his knees as he rubbed his eyes and whimpered. Fuck, he felt like murder. The shrill resonance in Eren's ears made him feel sick, and it was so prominent that he thought he should maybe talk to someone about it.

Dragging himself from his room, Eren didn't bother changing out of his pyjamas or running a brush through his hair. He wanted a really heavy hangover breakfast, stat.
Eren avoided going through the dining room, instead continuing down the hall and taking the other entrance into the kitchen. He could hear the clatter and scrape of utensils and hear both Father Erwin and Mikasa's level tones, but Eren was sure Levi and Annie would be there, too.

Rummaging through the fridge, Eren unearthed eggs, cheese, butter, and mushrooms, which he tossed to the counter. He popped four slices of wheat bread into the toaster, and moved to his already heating pan. Eren cooked quickly and messily. He had the talent for food, but not the patience to do anything that took much time.

Dropping a massive hunk of butter into the pan and watching it sizzle, Eren caught movement from the corner of his eye.

“Hey, Armin,” Eren said quietly – both because he didn't want to alert people in the dining room, and also because his head felt like it would roll off his shoulders if he spoke too loudly. “It's been a while. Since Annie, actually. Thanks for your help, by the way.”

“I... didn't really think it would work out how it did, to be honest. That was all you.”

Eren cracked four eggs into the pan and rapidly whisked them with a fork until they were scrambled and firming up in one round pancake. “Nah, you're the one who gave me the idea.”

“Well, at least everyone's okay.”

Eren didn't reply. He dropped masses of grated cheese and roughly chopped mushrooms were thrown on top, the egg flipped in half, and soon Eren was just waiting on his overflowing omlette to cook.

“Eren?” Armin sounded tentative as he took a step towards him. “Are you okay?”

“Headache. I'll be fine.”

“Are you sure that's all?”

Eren frowned, flicking a glance to Armin. “What d'you mean?”

“I just... you don't look the same as you normally do.”

“Well, I haven't showered.”

Armin laughed softly and shook his head. “No, stupid. You look... your light is dim. Like there's a dark cloud hanging over you.”

Eren looked up and saw only the ceiling. He shrugged. “Well, I don't know anything about that. I'm just hungry. Can we talk about this later today? I kind of have a lot on my mind right now.”

“With Father Erwin being back?”

“Did you know him?” Eren grabbed a plate and expertly slid the omelette on. He passed by Armin and laid a friendly hand on his shoulder as he moved along, smiling just a little at the warm jolt in his fingertips.

“I think?” Armin said with a frown. “Oh, don't forget your toast.”

“Shit, thanks.” Eren grabbed his cooling toast and brought it to the butter to slather on too much. “Do you mean you can't remember?”
“I recognise his face.”

“He was your exorcist too, huh?”

Armin was silent at Eren's side, then quietly said, “No. Levi was mine.”

Eren's interested peaked and he turned to face Armin. “Yeah?”

“Both times.”

“Both times?” Eren's eyes widened. “Did you -”

“Who're you talking to?” Levi said stiffly from the doorway.

Eren whipped around and nearly dropped his food. “Um. How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to see you carry on a full conversation with apparent thin air.” Levi said as he stepped into the kitchen with his hands folded behind his back. He didn't look worried or frightened, but he didn't look particularly happy, either. “Who was it?”

Eren shrugged. “You don't wanna know.” He began to walk past Levi, when a hand snapped out and tightly gripped Eren's forearm. Eren swallowed and met Levi's eyes, uncomfortably aware of how close they stood.

“Tell me.”

“How about this, Levi? First you tell me not to talk about it, because you don't want to hear it and neither does anyone else. Now you want the details? Because you can't have both.”

Levi's hold tightened, his eyes widening just enough that only someone standing as near as Eren would notice. “Armin.”

“Yeah.”

“How often?”

“You said you didn't want to know.”

Eren yelped when Levi yanked him down to an equal level. He looked into Levi's eyes and didn't see their usual confidence. Was he shaken?

“How often?” Levi said between clenched teeth.

“Every couple of days,” Eren said with a narrowed look. “Now let me go. If your job is to make sure I don't get hurt, then you're shit at it, because my arm is killing me.”

Levi mimicked Eren's expression, and although he didn't release Eren, his grip softened to barely anything. Just holding Eren in place. “You're different today.”

“Why is everyone saying that?” Eren said with exasperation. “I haven't showered, so I look like I've rolled out of a dumpster and I have a titanic headache which is making me feel murderous. Now, all I want to do is eat my motherfucking omelette without the world getting in the way of that. Is that so much for me to ask, Levi?”

After a tense silence between them, Levi gave Eren a blatant once over. “You do look like shit. Eat and clean yourself up. You're offending my eyes.”
Eren scoffed and pulled his arm away. “Well, we can't all be beautiful and pristine works of art like you.” With that, he swept from the room and into the dining room.

“Wow,” was the first thing Mikasa said. “Eren.”

“You look like shit,” Annie said somberly.

Eren felt his face heat. “You know what?” he said gruffly, with what was very close to a pout. He pointed at Mikasa, then Annie, “Fuck you – and you -” he pointed at Father Erwin, who was staring with raised eyebrows. “And possibly you, it's too early to tell. I'm eating in front of the TV.” Eren stomped out of the room and escaped.

Flopping onto the couch with a scowl, Eren turned on some cartoons and sat there, stuffing his face with a vengeance. He recognised that he was being way more craptastic with people than he ever was, and wondered if it really was just to do with this worsening ear issue. Maybe it was knowing that he'd have to talk to Father Erwin about some serious shit today and a part of him knew he didn't want to hear what was coming.

“Hey,” Mikasa's soft voice came from the doorway.

Eren looked at her plaintively. “I'm sorry.”

With an eye roll, Mikasa strolled into the room, stood behind the couch and slumped forward to wrap her arms around Eren's neck. She pillowed her cheek on his wild mass of hair and said, “We all have days where we wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Want to talk about it?”

Eren reached up and put his hand over Mikasa's. “I just know I'm going to hear bad news today.”

“How so?”

“Father Erwin is a long time friend of my dad, I guess. I get the feeling that both of them know something about me that I don't... and I'm not sure if I want to know what it is.”

Mikasa was silent. After a while, she sighed and stood, giving Eren a little smack across the head.

“Hey! What was that for?”

“Don't overthink things, Eren. You'll be buried in it if you do – I'd know, I've been there. Take these things as they come. And if there's something you do or don't want to know, make it clear. I know you're loud-mouthed enough to do at least that.”

Eren mulled over her words and knew they were all true. “Yeah.” He took a deep breath and tilted his head back against the couch, looking at Mikasa upside down with a small smile. “Thanks, Mikasa.”

“Just don't be an asshole,” Mikasa said. “That's Levi's job.”

Eren managed a laugh. “Alright.”

After his blissfully alone breakfast, Eren snuck upstairs and took too much Advil before his scalding shower. Feeling halfway to human by the end of it, Eren tugged on some comfy jeans with holes in the knees and crotch, a t-shirt at random, and left his feet blissfully bare. With Mikasa's words lingering with him, Eren felt ready to take on the day.

Eren found Father Erwin and Levi in the library.
“God has finally performed a miracle,” Levi said with a raised eyebrow. He was leaning on the edge of the mahogany desk, ankles and arms crossed, while Father Erwin sat behind the desk. “You actually look decent.”

“Uh, yeah.” With a self-conscious smile, Eren ran a hand through his hair. He really needed it cut. “Sorry about before,” he said, addressing Father Erwin. “I wasn’t feeling well.”

“That’s perfectly understandable, Eren. You’ve been through a lot. And Levi tells me you’ve been having full conversations with spirits?”

Eren shrugged and closed the library door behind him. “Sometimes.” He said in a lush leather chair and hooked his knee over one of the soft side arms.

“Do you seek them out or do they find you?”

“They find me. I’ve never gone looking for anything. Sounds like asking for trouble.”

“That’s an experiment Hanji will have to add to the list,” Father Erwin said to Levi, who just nodded, as if taking mental note. Carefully watching Eren, Father Erwin said, “And what do they tell you?”

“Honestly?” Eren said with barely a smile. “They just want to be heard like any other person. Some want messages passed on to loved ones, while others just want someone to remember them.”

“And Armin?”

Eren flicked a glance to Levi, then looked away, studying the ceiling high shelves of books and their beautiful bindings. “He doesn’t want to disappear.”

“Explain.”

“He, uh – he says he’s forgetting. People, places. Who he was. His family.” He looked at Father Erwin. “He recognise your face and remembers your name, but he’s forgotten everything else.”

Levi’s expression had darkened considerably over the course of the conversation. “So, he’s forgotten -”

“Not you,” Eren said quickly, meeting his eyes. “He hasn’t forgotten about you.”

“So, he’s told you.”

“What happened?”

“No. What happened?”

“Eren,” Father Erwin said, a deep drum of authority in his voice, silencing everyone else. “How did you know you could pull that demon from Annie?”

“I -” Eren looked down at his hands. “Armin and I had just discovered that I can touch spirits and -”

“Hold the fuck up, brat,” Levi snapped. “Why did you not tell me this before?”

Eren aimed a dismal look Levi’s way, trying to remind him of their earlier conversation in the kitchen. “Armin came to me and said some weird things. Like, how alive people looked like ghosts to spirits, the same way we tend to see ghosts as kind of misty entities and see-through beings.”
“Wait.” Levi shook his head. “How do spirits look to you?”

Eren frowned and shrugged. “Like you or me. People.”

“Fine. Keep talking.”

“He said I was a lighthouse,” Eren told them quietly, feeling his neck flush up to his cheeks. “A beacon to them, a light to follow. Or something. Armin said that the way I saw him – solid – was the way he saw me, too. His theory was that we could touch and... well, yeah, we could.”

The entire room was silent. An old grandfather clocked ticked away the slow seconds.

“So, um.” Eren tried for a charming smile, but wasn't sure how well it worked since both Father Erwin and Levi remained stoic. “Do I get to ask any questions, yet?”

Levi rolled his eyes and pushed himself off the desk to wander towards the bay window behind Father Erwin, his back to them all. Father Erwin folded his hands atop the desk and quirked his lips. “Of course, Eren. Although I can imagine what you might want to ask, go on.”

Eren swallowed. Now, he had no idea how to word his million curiosities. Why hadn't he considered this earlier? What was most important to him right now? What knowledge would mean the most to him?

Taking a deep breath, Eren quickly said, “What does your relationship with my dad have to do with what's happening to me?”

Father Erwin nodded and steepled his fingers beneath his chin. “Your father used to be my co-worker, of sorts. When you were just a child. You and I have met many times.”

“Us?” It was already too much to process. Eren opened his mouth, closed it, opened it. Then finally said, “What did he do? My dad?”

“His occupation was remarkably similar to Zoe Hanji's. Although he was more involved in fieldwork. He accompanied me to all exorcisms, both to record what was happening, but also to make sure the patient was as safe and unharmed as they could be. He cared for them very well. During the time which we were partners, I had no deaths due to exorcism.”

“That sounds fucking horrifying.”

Father Erwin breathed a soft sigh through his nose. “It is what it is, Eren. Someone has to do what we do. At least we now have doctors. Things weren't like that even when I was young. Your father was talented at what he did. A lot of people owe him their life.”

Eren didn't know how to reply, so he just said, “And what about me? My dad knew to call you when he saw what was happening, but he didn't bother telling me what was going on.”

“It's my personal opinion that he was concerned that if he explained what was happening to you, you would remember.”

Heartbeat crashing painfully against Eren's ribs, he whispered, “Remember what?”

Father Erwin met Eren's gaze. “That the same thing happened to your mother.”
Hey, ya'll! Well, at least I'm sober. No more wine for me. Like, for at least a half a year. Mistakes were made, folks. Chapters were written and posted. Never again.

Anywho, I'm aware this chapter is short, but I hate fluffing chapters out with bullshit. Maybe I'm like Levi in that sense haha. I like my chapters concise and to the point. A reason for everything and so on and so forth.

But please enjoy, anyway! Big stuff next chapter. I guess it's gonna be big stuff from here on out, most of the time!

Struck dumb, Eren swore he physically felt the world fracture beneath his feet. His hands shook, his breath caught in his throat, tearing at his lungs for release. He could only stare, distantly aware that Levi had turned to gawk at the back of Father Erwin's head with what could only be construed as closeted rage.

Eren didn't know what to say. He could barely recall how to form a sentence.

He could have jumped across the desk and kissed Levi, when he spoke for Eren instead. “The fuck, Erwin?”

Erwin reacted to Levi as much as he would a pesky fly. His attention remained on Eren. “I suspect your father won't be pleased to hear that I've told you this, but I must admit that I never approved of his never enlightening you, even after you'd well passed into adulthood. It had been convenient for him that you'd handled your trauma by blocking everything out.”

“Ev...rtything...” Eren said softly, peering at his hands. He felt like he'd been abandoned at the bottom of damp, dark well, and the truth was far above his head. He scrambled and scraped up the slick walls, nails splintering and ripping out of the flesh of his fingers as he attempted to claw his way up towards the truth.

Why couldn't he picture his mother around the time that she'd died? Eren had been told that she'd been sick, but he couldn't even remember her confined to a bed. He couldn't remember saying goodbye to her for the last time, or going to her funeral, or curling up in the closet with her dresses, desperately trying to memorise her scent.

Eren had never dwelled over the manner of her death. When he did bother to look back, the Eren of before his mother's death and after felt like two different people with individual lives. That Eren had died along with his mother, and this one was a cheap imitation of who he'd once been. He couldn't connect the two – couldn't remember what had moulded one Eren into the other Eren, this Eren.

“Jeager? Hey, Eren.” Levi was gripping Eren's chin, tilting his face up to meet his. Levi's eye colour was beautiful, Eren thought dully. Like frost, all silver and blue sparks. Not solid grey, not boring, but stunningly emotive. “Eren, where the hell are you? Get the fuck out of your head or I'll kick it in.”
Levi slapped Eren's cheek and Eren startled, blinking wildly as he looked around the room.

“I -” Eren sniffled, bringing a numb hand up to his face. His cheeks were soaked and his lips tasted of damp salt. “I'm crying?”

“Like a fucking baby,” Levi said murmured, his brow furrowed as he straightened and warily eyed Eren. “Get your shit together, Jeager. Unless you want Erwin to get bored and walk out.”

“No!” Eren shot up in his seat, leaning forward eagerly, staring at Father Erwin with panic rising in his throat. “No, please, tell me. Please tell me.”

Father Erwin's voice was low and soothing. “Calm down, Eren. I don’t plan on keeping you in the dark.” He paused. “Are you prepared?”

“As I'll ever be,” Eren said quietly, wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

“Then I'll begin.” Father Erwin cleared his throat and gave Levi an indeciferable look. “Would you like Levi to be here, or would you prefer that he left?”

“Oiy, ballsack, I've got every right to be here. Who the fuck d'you think you are that you could put this kid into my care without telling me any of this?”

Father Erwin raised his eyebrows, his tone reasonable. “I do recall telling you that Eren was important and should be watched closely.”

“What the fuck does that even mean to me? You think every soul is important. I sure as hell d-”


Levi snapped his mouth shut and shot Eren a cryptic look. Father Erwin just nodded.

“I'll be as plain as possible, although cases like these are never simple. Carla had always been sensitive. It had been one of the reasons Grisha had pursued the paranormal branch of his profession. He wanted answers to the unknown – as had Carla, seemingly. She'd encouraged his work and regularly acquiesced to testing and experiments. Nothing particularly invasive – just manners of measuring the extent of her gift.

“You had it too. The gift. Nothing like you do now, of course. But you had a sense of things. You knew when the neighbour's cat was going to die, just as you knew where Carla had misplaced her wedding ring. If you had a talent for anything more than that, I have no idea. Carla was protective of you. She didn't wish for you to think of yourself as strange, or for others to bully you for what might be revealed to them.”

Eren didn't remember any of this. It was like being narrated the life of a stranger. His memories whirled, his fingertips digging into the leather arms of the chair. He just nodded and listened.

Father Erwin's sigh was nearly inaudible. “And then we encountered a case. Your father and I went to the home of someone in the midst of a particularly powerful possession. This demon was highly intelligent. Talkative, but not in the way most demons are with their mindless threats and deviant prattle. This one wanted to converse. This one did not want to destroy their host, but to live within them. But the host wasn't strong enough. Neither was the exorcism.”

Silence rang through the room. In a remote corner of Eren's mind, he could swear he heard a woman's piercing cackle. Laughter that sent a vicious chill down his spine.
Shifting in his seat, Father Erwin looked at the desk, appearing deep in thought. “When the exorcism... failed – when it failed and the victim passed away, Grisha asked if he could take home some of her belongings and religious relics. Some of them seemed quite old, and he thought they may have been some use to himself or the church. I said it was fine, as the victim had no living family and her things would have no place to go, anyway.”

Father Erwin looked up and met Eren's eyes. “I wish I hadn't. I wish I hadn't let him take anything home.”

Eren didn't ask why. He was sure his face said it all.

Nodding, almost to himself, Father Erwin carried on. “Amongst those items were a rosary, a ring, and a necklace with a key. I don't know which piece it was, but one of them carried the evil of that damned demon with it.”

Swallowing hard, Eren looked at Levi, who he realised had been observing him the entire time.

Father Erwin's voice sounded far away. “It didn't take long for the demon to find a new host in Carla. She was young, susceptible, her mind and body open to the other world. The demon had laughed and said it had been like slipping into the perfect meatsuit. I'll never forget those words. Never.”

“And you failed,” Eren said, unable to hide the bitterness in his voice as he met Father Erwin's eyes. “You didn't save her. You let her die.”

“I -” Father Erwin shut his mouth, his lips thinning as he watched tears streak Eren's cheeks. “Yes. I did.”

“And my dad? What did he do?” Eren was shocked he could speak at all. His breath was coming out in increasingly angry puffs, each gulp of air like swallowing fire.

“What he could. Everything that he could. But she was gone, Eren. That demon was the most powerful entity I'd ever come across in my life. I don't know of a body who could ever hold it in.” Father Erwin paused. “And that's what it had been looking for. Humanity's strongest host. Of what I'm aware, it hasn't found that, yet.”

“And do you think it ever will?” Eren said quietly.

Father Erwin met his eyes, his head just slightly cocked. “It's not impossible. And should it happen, I'd very much desire to speak with it. We have quite a bit of unfinished business.”

Eren snapped back as if punched. His voice was a hiss that he barely recognised. “Why would you ever wish that on another person?”

“I don't wish it, Eren. I'm just conscious of the fact that this is a demon who does not plan on stopping their search. It will return. Of that, I'm sure.”

“That's sick.”

Father Erwin didn't look bothered in the least. Eren sat there, feeling overwhelmed and furious and drowning in a fucking pit of black bile and disgust at everything he'd just heard.

Eventually, Father Erwin leaned back in the high-backed chair, looking every inch the leader – or dictator. “I suspect your father still has all of his notes from that time. Back at your house, in the basement. I'm sure you know how he never throws anything away.”
Eren frowned at that. If he did -

“Well, Eren, we’ve passed quite a bit of time with this conversation. Not that I’m not at your disposal in the future, but for now I have business to which I have to attend.” He stood to his full, intimidating height. “So, if you’ll excuse me.”

Father Erwin breezed passed him, until Eren jumped to his feet and grabbed Father Erwin's arm – hard.

“Those spirits on you?” Eren said, hushed and menacing as he met Father Erwin's eyes with as much aggression as he could muster. “They're going to tear you apart. Bit by bit. They're already working at it. Every life that has died under your watch – every family member who blames you for it – and maybe even some lowlife demons that you managed to exorcise. They're with you, always. To the grave. And they'll be the ones that dig it for you.”

Eren released Father Erwin as suddenly as he'd captured him. “Now, if you'll excuse me.” He swept by, his glare passing from Father Erwin to Levi, who was looking at Eren as if he'd never seen him before.

Walk, keep walking, move your fucking feet, Jaeger. Eren egged himself on, forcing his limbs to function properly. Dragging himself to his bedroom, Eren mechanically put on socks and shoes. Gathered his wallet and the keys to his house.

When he came back downstairs on weak knees, the entire house was cemetery silent.

Eren walked outside, wincing at the midday sun. Without a single look back, he marched down the sidewalk, found the nearest bus stop, and waited.

Eren was going to pay his father a visit.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

HERE. HERE GUYS, HAVE FOUR THOUSAND WORDS OF PURE ERERI.
WHAT IS MY LIFE.
/THROWS SELF OFF A BRIDGE

Barely conscious of having boarded the bus, Eren sat at the back, his temple pressed against the window. He watched the world pass by – innocent faces, carefree smiles. They had no idea.

Eren felt numb. Like someone had stabbed him in the heart with anaesthesia. How had he become so detached when a short time ago he was openly weeping?

This riptide of emotions were taking their toll on Eren. He could feel it in the slump of his shoulders, the drag of his step, the remote way he heard his own voice and that of others. Like something was dragging him away by the ankle, further and further from his own humanity.

Recognising his town, then this street, Eren stood listlessly, swaying on his feet until he grabbed a seat for balance. Everything felt like a balancing act, recently, and Eren was so damn tired. Exhausted down to his soul.

Feet that felt too heavy met the pavement, and Eren shoved his hands in the pockets of his tattered jeans, eyes downcast as he made his way to his house by rote. It wasn't a large house. A one story, two bedroom with a finished basement that Dad used for whatever the hell he felt like. Eren had never been allowed down there, and only now did he have an inkling as to the reason.

When his house came into view, Eren boggled, dumbfounded.

A slick, silver sports car sat in his driveway. And, lounging on the cement steps leading up to the front door, was Levi. The keys he twirled around one finger chimed and glinted in the sun, his eyes shadowed, but most certainly locked on Eren's approaching form.

Speeding up, Eren stomped up the path to his home with a scowl. “What the hell're you doing here?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Levi replied easily, his tone almost too light, considering the occasion that brought them here.

“You don't know?”

“Oh, I know, dickwad. I just wanted you to say it so you could hear how stupid it sounds coming out of your mouth.”

Eren went toe to toe with Levi, leaning forward until their faces were close. If Eren tripped, he'd be dropping onto Levi's lap. Eren made sure he was steady. “Do you seriously think it's stupid for me to want answers?”

Levi coolly met Eren's eyes. “No. I think it's fucking dumb as horse shit that you'd come here while
“I'm not pissed off,” Eren said with a bleak air. “I'm not anything. I just want to know. It's my right – no one can tell me otherwise.”

With an expressive sigh that surprised the hell out of Eren, Levi grabbed Eren by the collar and tugged him closer. Eren struggled for balance, swallowed hard as Levi said in a low voice, “I'm not here to tell you otherwise, Eren. I'm here to make sure you don't make an ass of yourself and fuck this up by getting into a brainless screaming match with your old man.” Levi shoved Eren away, watching him stumble and regain his footing. “You said you trusted me. So trust me. Don't do anything stupid.”

Eren didn't have a rebuttal to that. He was more overwhelmed by the sincerity in Levi's eyes than he knew what to do with.

So he just nodded and gestured to the door. “Let's go.”

Levi got to his feet and dusted himself off one too many times.

As Eren worked the three locks on the door, he peered over his shoulder at Levi. “What is it with you and the OCD clean thing, anyway?”

Levi flicked a brow and slipped his hands in the pockets of his crisp navy slacks. “You do have a way with words, don't you, brat?”

“Says you. A third of the shit you spew are just expletives.”

“Them's fancy words.”

“I do have a college degree.” The last locked unclicked. “Dick.”

“Yeah, yeah, you adore me. Let's get this shit over with.”

Eren shoved the door open, muttering, “Adore wouldn't be the word.”

“Then what is the word?” Levi said quietly.

Eren promptly tripped over the welcome mat and yelped, squealing to a halt before he dropped onto his face. Flicking his tousled bangs from his eyes, Eren sent Levi a sheepish smile. “That doormat is new. I wasn't expecting it.”

Levi stared at him blandly. “Sure, kid.” He scanned the living room. “No one's been here for a couple of days, Eren.”

“Huh?” Eren looked around with a frown. Dust coated the magazine-covered coffee table. The potted plant by the window was crippled and dying. Motes floated and flickered in the air. The house was quiet.

“Shit,” Eren said under his breath. “Shit!” He whirled towards a small end table and punted it across the room with a crash, shattering a lamp in the process. “Fucking fuck all of this. I should have called him first. Of course I should have. He said he'd be away for days and he never tells me how long that actually is. God -” Eren's voice cracked, tears coming through, “Dammit! Why can't anything go right?”

“Eren -”
“How could he keep this from me? How could he let me live without – without – with – with -” Eren hiccuped wetly and violently rubbed his hands over his damp eyes.

“Eren.” Levi circled Eren's wrists with long, cool fingers. Firmly, Levi brought Eren's hands down and held them at Eren's sides. “Breathe, kid.” When Eren cast his gaze to the floor, his breathing coming in sharp, panicky pants, Levi said with soft authority. “Hey, look at me. Look at me. That's good, Eren. Now, take a deep breath. Better. I'd hate to have to knock you out to calm you the hell down. Actually, no, no I wouldn't.”

A short, watery laugh burst from Eren, astonishing him into silence. The things Levi managed to do – to make Eren feel, were remarkable. Even in the short time they’d known each other, Eren couldn't remember a person who was more patient with him – who believed in him like Levi did. Even when Levi made a show of his irritability, it was all just that – a show.

The truth was, Levi was a good man. He just didn't want anyone to know.

“Eren? Where are you now?” Levi said, not having released his hold on Eren's wrists. The light was dim in the house, but enough of the sun filtered through the dust to reflect the uncharacteristic hesitance in Levi's expression.

Cocking his head just slightly, Eren's lips curved as he fixed his gaze on Levi's mouth, then upwards. “I'm here. With you.”

A beat of silence pulsed between them, thick and heavy with anticipation.

Then Levi was rolling his eyes and releasing his hold on Eren, reaching up to condescendingly pat him on the cheek. “Great, good answer. At least you're still vaguely sane.” He turned on his heel and wandered out of the room, calling out, “So, where is this mysterious basement?”

Eren blinked owlishly at Levi's retreating form. He released a shaky breath and followed.

What the hell had he been doing? Levi was a fucking priest. Not to mention how royally fucked up Eren's situation was. Nobody went for the guy with all the baggage. Especially not baggage that involved dead people lining up to chat.

“There,” Eren said dully as Levi walked down the hall, his fingertips gracing over each doorknob. At Eren's voice, he paused at the correct door and opened it. Eren half expected a menacing creak or an eerie noise wailing from the basement, but instead, absolute silence prevailed. There was something more wrong about that.

Levi held the door open for Eren, waiting.

Eren gave him a look. “Age before beauty.”

Voice dangerously low, Levi said, “Say that again and you'll find yourself at the bottom of those stairs in a lot quicker time than it takes to walk down them.”

Eren couldn't believe that he could laugh at a time like this, when his world was upside down and he was still reeling. Despite himself, he chuckled and headed down the stairs first.

The basement looked innocuous. Eren supposed it wouldn't exactly be like his dad to decorate the place in religious and cult paraphernalia, but the place was fucking tame. Grey carpet, grey walls. Neat, barren desk, flanked with high, wide bookshelves. Upon closer inspection, the books' subject matter were all about the strange and unusual.
Although, Eren had a hard time with what he could actually consider unusual, these days. In his life, it seemed like everything was fair game and nothing was off limits.

“Eren,” was all Levi said, but was enough for chills to prickle Eren's skin. He could tell that Levi had found something.

Crossing over to Levi's side of the room, Eren's eyes widened as he noted the wall of shoe boxes. From afar, there didn't seem to be anything strange about them, aside from the fact that most people didn't line a wall with shoe boxes. What was particularly odd was that they were all dated. Not just dated, but organised horizontally by date.

Eren dropped to his knees and squinted at the furthest corner. The date was older than he was.

Flicking a glance at the other end of the boxes, Eren quietly studied Levi.

With a look of menace on his face, Levi was staring up at highest corner of the boxes, the most diagonal from where Eren sat. He took a step forward, hand reaching up. Almost hesitantly, like he really didn't want to do it, he went to his tip-toes, fingers splayed out in an attempt to grab the box. He was missing by a mile.

Eren snorted – then slapped a hand over his mouth in horror.

Like a predator sniffing out his prey, Levi whipped his head around, his eyes narrowing at Eren. “If I find out that you just laughed at what I think you did, I'll fuck you up so hard you'll be shitting out your mouth and talking out your ass for a week.”

Eren audibly eep-ed, but couldn't help the smile that peeked from behind his hand. “That's no way for a holy man to speak.”

Levi shrugged and looked up to the high shoebox again. “Who says I'm all that holy?”

That was a question that Eren didn't dare answer.

Instead, he got to his feet and sidled up beside Levi. Peering up, he couldn't make out the scribbled date from that height, but if his dad's organisation skills were to be trusted, this should be his last exorcism. Going to his toes, Eren reached up and brought the shoebox down.

It was surprisingly light. Eren gave an experimental shake, earning a look of annoyance from Levi. Yeah, he probably shouldn't be shaking possibly dangerous religions relics like they were Christmas presents.

Taking a deep breath, he turned the shoebox carefully, and checked the date.

Eren's shoulders sagged. “S'not the one,” he muttered.

“What?” Levi said, leaning in.

“I said it's not the one.” Eren whipped the box away from himself, shoving it against Levi's stomach for him to hold.

“You didn't look inside.”

“I know the date my mother died, Levi.” Eren trailed his fingertip alone the dates at his eye line, going back later and later. He stopped and shivered. He felt icy cold, on the verge of shivering. “That one,” he whispered. “It's that one.”
When Eren didn't grab the shoebox after a full minute, Levi sighed and dropped the one he was holding with a thunk. He snatched the new one from amidst the rest. It slid out easily, causing the other boxes to tip crookedly into the space left behind.

“Do you want to do this here?” Levi said.

“No,” Eren said quietly. “I hate this house.” He turned without looking at Levi, and made for the stairs. “I'm gonna get more stuff from my room,” he said sluggishly. “Clothes, phone... stuff.” He gestured vaguely with his hand.

“I'll come with.”

“You don't have to.”

Levi scoffed as they climbed the steps. “You're pale as those ghosts you're so fond of, you fucking brat. You're not fainting on my watch.”

“I don't faint, I pass out,” Eren said half-heartedly. He was barely involved in the conversation. Merely going through the motions. His head was with that box, and how now that he had it, he didn't ever want it opened.

“Yeah, yeah.” Levi gave Eren's back a shove as they went down the hall. “Just get your shit and let's get out of here. Your house is a fucking breeding ground for disease. I feel like I've already caught something life-threatening.”

They entered Eren's room, and he mechanically went about emptying a couple of drawers and finding his cellphone. The last time he'd been in this bed, he'd been possessed. That seemed like forever ago – especially because he could only remember flashes of the experience.

Eren was shoving his junk in a large duffel, when he noticed that Levi was sitting at the foot of the bed, inspecting the room with a veiled expression.

“What?” Eren said. “I know it's messy, don't complain.”

“We both know it is, so I wasn't going to bother.” Levi waited a beat. “I just thought everything looked kind of impersonal.”

“Yeah, well, belongings have never meant much to me. I prefer people over stuff.”

“Cute,” Levi said, his voice laced with sarcasm.

Eren's reply was to smack a pillow into Levi's face.

Levi caught the pillow an inch before it hit him and threw it back, but harder.

“Ouch. How the hell can you make a fucking pillow hurt a person?”

“What can I say, it's a gift. You done here?”

“Yeah.” Eren zipped up with a sharp flick of wrist. He was getting antsy, and he sensed that Levi was too, for some reason. “Let's go.”

They hurried out of the room and through the house, Eren still refusing to look at the box under Levi's arm. He locked up the house behind them, but didn't look back as they headed to the car and got in.
“Nice ride,” Eren said.

“I know.”

“Aren't priests supposed to, I don't know, not covet stuff?”

“Well, I can't covet it if I already own it, fuckwit.” He shifted gears, backed out onto the street, and sped like a goddamn maniac down a school zone.

Eren's eyes widened, his hand flying up to clamp the 'oh shit' handle above his head.

“Anyway,” Levi said casually, “It's not like I'm a priest anymore.”

Eren was sure he got whiplash from how quickly he whirled to gawk at Levi. “What? But you -”

“I haven't officially renounced, but I'll get around to it,” he said, speeding through a stop sign, when he saw no one was at the intersection. “Didn't you notice that I don't wear the collar?”

“Yeah, but you're not exactly an orthodox kind of guy. I just thought it was a fashion statement or something.”

Levi laughed out loud – short and bold and full of humour, a flash of white teeth and a dangerous curl to the corner of his mouth. Eren felt his heart flip-flop.

“Kid, you're gonna be the death of me.”

“I fucking will be the death of you if you keep calling me 'kid'. I'm -”

“Twenty-two. I know, I know. You're like a broken record.”

“So are you, with the way you're always calling me it.”

“I'm just reminding myself.”

“Of what?”

At a stoplight, Levi leaned over Eren's lap and flicked open the glove compartment. He pulled out a pair of sunglasses, and Eren had a split second to inhale Levi's scent. He smelled clean, fresh, and utterly natural. No artifice.

Slipping his sunglasses on, Levi said, “Want food?”

“Uh -”

“Too bad, because we're getting food.”

“It's not your job to fatten me up, Levi.”

“It is, in fact, part of my job to fatten you up, Eren. So shut up and deal.” With that, Levi flicked on the radio and turned it up too loud.

Eren rolled down his window and hung is arm out, spreading his fingers to feel the air sift between them. He wondered if this was Levi's way of distracting him from the imminent trauma that was likely lurking inside that shoebox. Maybe Levi had noticed that Eren didn't want to go there just yet.

Or maybe Levi was just hungry and feeling the cabin fever as much as Eren. Either way, Eren wasn't
about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

After about five minutes of comfortable silence, they pulled into a diner parking lot. They were seated and served by a waitress who acted like him and Levi were the cutest thing she'd ever seen, and it kind of made Eren more self-conscious than he normally was.

His teen years had been painfully awkward. He'd been a lot more unsociable back then and doubted himself at every turn. Mostly known as a loner with a chip in his shoulder, his peers had basically ignored him, when possible.

After he'd left school, Eren had gone to a college and received his bachelor's in Sport Science. He'd buffed up a little more, filled out his lanky frame with lithe muscle, and ended up with a job at a local gym. People at the gym didn't know him, for the most part, and Eren had been able to minutely reinvent himself. He made more small-talk, asked more questions, became invested in people. Reminded himself that he wasn't actually alone in this world, no matter how it sometimes felt. He'd just had to put himself out there.

But he still felt like everything he'd accomplished was kind of a nowhere achievement with a nowhere job. But it had kept him going. His dad had been the one to push him into taking extra classes and to pursue another degree, specifically in Nutritional Science, but Eren was bored bored bored with that. He was almost glad for this whole possession thing, on some level, because it meant he could give up school.

He didn't even like school.

“There you go again,” Levi said, shutting the menu he'd been reading and setting it aside.

Eren blinked up from his own menu, not having read a word. “Go where?”

“That's what I wonder. Are there monologues going on in there, or do you just narrate your entire life to yourself?”

“As I was sitting with Levi – who, by the way, was still wearing his sunglasses indoors like a total douchebag – where was I? Right. As I was sitting with Levi, I got to wondering how he was allowed to ask me so many questions all fucking day long, but whenever I asked him anything, I got the silent treatment,” Eren narrated with a singsong tone. “It seemed to me that I should start giving him a taste of his own medicine and then he would stop being such a shit guy about it.”

While Eren spoke, Levi had flipped off his glasses and set them carefully on the table. Sinking back in the booth, he looked as if he were fighting for a sober expression.

“Well, I'm not telling you my fucking life story in this shitty diner,” he said, just as the waitress came up and heard him call her workplace 'shitty'.

They ordered their food and the waitress scurried off, leaving Levi drumming his fingertips on the scuffed table. “So, we're friends?”

Eren gave a dramatic sigh and raised his eyebrows. “What do you think we're doing right now?”


“Together.”

“Gold star for you, kid.”
Eren kicked Levi's shin under the table. Levi shot one back with a glare, catching Eren on the knee.

“We're eating and talking together, Levi. Something we do kind of regularly. I count that as friends.”

“Your estimation of friendship is meagre,” Levi said, glancing out the window at his shoulder.

Eren rolled his eyes. “You're so high maintainence.”

“You say that like it's a bad thing. At least I don't walk around looking like a poor college kid.”

“I was a poor college kid!”

“Well, you don't have to look it now.”

“Oh, really? And when you were in college, did you look a fucking Armani model?”

There was that surprisingly charming laugh, this time quieter since they weren't alone and Levi was probably aware of that.

“No.” Levi said, fixing his attention to Eren once more. “I dress like this now because I can.”

“And you couldn't before?”

“Not even close.”

Before Eren could follow that line of thought further, their food arrived and he dug in with an appetite he hadn't realised he carried.

Levi pointed at Eren with his fork. “Heart attack waiting to happen,” he said of Eren's cheeseburger.

Eren just grinned and dug in. Their conversation was chilled out and superficial for the remainder of the meal. Eren ended up talking about his and Mikasa's plans to move in together when this was all over. He noticed Levi's expression change.

“What?” he said between bites.

“What do you mean, what?”

“You're making a face.”

Levi scowled. “No, I'm not.”

“You look constipated.”

“I will maim you.”

Eren waved a fry at him. “Only after you tell me what's up.”

“Nothing’s up, you shithead.”

“What, are you jealous or something?”

Levi coughed and sputtered into the ice water he'd brought to his lips. “Jesus, no. I was thinking what a bizarre threesome you, Mikasa, and Jean would be. You know they're fucking, right?”

Eren made a face. “Don’t make me hurl. Anyway, I wouldn't be into that. Big ol' gay, remember?”
“I couldn’t forget,” Levi muttered under his breath, taking a long drink of his water.

“You’re gay, too, right? Or something.”

Once again, Levi choked on his water. “Christ, kid, yes. Yes, I am. What’s it t’you?”

Eren hadn’t realised how personal the question was until the word vomit had already spewed forth. He felt his face burn and thanked whatever God was out there when the waitress came with their check.

Standing quickly, Eren breathlessly said he’d pay the check, snatched it out of Levi’s hand, and practically ran away with it. Again – what had he been thinking?

The car ride home was mostly silent, but it wasn’t comfortable for Eren. Too much weighed on his mind. His mother, his past, his future, Levi.

When Levi parked in front of the house, Eren unbuckled his seatbelt and turned in his seat to face him.

“Levi?”

“What?” He sounded tense, but he still shifted to meet Eren’s gaze.

“Thanks.” Eren looked away, then back, chewing on his lip. “For today. And being with me when I needed it.”

Levi stared, for once appearing speechless.

“Um… too awkward?” Eren said.

Levi sighed and shook his head. “Just… it’s fine, Eren. You don’t have to say shit like that. In fact, don’t ever and it’ll make it more comfortable for everyone involved.”

Eren thought it over and grinned. “Deal.”

In return, Levi only frowned and looked to the shoebox in the back seat. “Ready for this?”

“As long as you’re there.”

“What did I just say about embarrassing yourself?”

Eren couldn’t help but snicker. He hoped that, despite what was inside that box, he would still get to laugh again soon.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Dear Precious Snowflake Reader,
You may or may not have noticed this, but I have a horrible disease where I need to insert humour into all situations. Please don't take this to mean that I don't think the subject matter is serious, or even that the character doesn't think so - it's just that, I think humour exists in all forms, and especially when we're traumatised or not thinking clearly, that's when we can do or say the most stupid and funny things. OR THAT'S JUST MY EXCUSE BECAUSE I CAN'T WRITE SERIOUSLY???? But no, really. This fic has shit that goes down, but I like the black as hell devil's food cake to be sprinkled with a thousand rainbow sprinkles. Because. Because sprinkles.

Love,
Lala

PS I don't think this letter makes sense. Mostly because it's 2:45am.

“That you, Jaeger?” Jean's voice sounded from the front room.

Soberly eyeing Levi, Eren took the shoebox from his hands, tucking it under his own arm as he turned away and followed the chatter of the television.

Upon entering, both Jean and Mikasa looked up from their show. Jean's face lit up. “Hey, freak, how's it going?”

“Same as, I dunno, two days ago or however long it's been.” Eren wandered in and perched on the arm of the couch. “Don't you have a life?”

“Better than your life at this point.” Jean grinned. “I'm joining the Marines. What are you gonna do with your life?”

“Be a Ghostbuster,” Eren said flatly. He didn't know if he was being serious or joking. It kind of sounded appealing. Battling the things that had consumed his mother and dismantled his family.

“What is that?” Mikasa interrupted, fixed on the shoebox.

“This? Nothing important. I'll get rid of it and come back down.” Turning on his heel and making for the stairs, Eren found Levi waiting there with his arms folded across his chest.

“You planning on ignoring that?” he said, nodding at the shoebox.

“It can wait. Later. Tonight.”

Levi shrugged. “Fine. Come find me when you're ready.”

“You sure? I mean, I can deal with it on my own.”

Levi flicked an eyebrow. “Do you want to deal with it on your own?”
“Uh. Not... really?”

“Fine, then there's your answer. Stop making everything more difficult than it has to be, brat.”

Eren rolled his eyes, but his lips curved slightly as he swept past Levi and up the stairs. He wondered why Levi had quit being a priest. When he actually put his mind to it, he was really good at helping people – in his own unique way.

The late afternoon bled into the evening, and Eren, Mikasa, and Jean spent it all in the front room. They played video games and talked about the future, and Eren imagined this would've been what it could have felt like if he'd had actual friends in high school. Well, he just had to tell himself that it was better late than never.

When Annie came home from soccer practice, all sweaty with grass stains on her knees and dirt in her hair, she wandered in and collapsed onto the couch.

She looked good – better than when Eren had first met her. Her cheeks were pink and she smirked a little more than before. She was still a strong mix of sweet and sour, heavy on the sour, but he liked that about her. Annie wasn't a fake; she was genuine. Just like Levi, Mikasa, Jean.

Eren hadn't known any of them long, but he trusted his instincts. As his mother would say – they were keepers.

The night lengthened and none of them to seemed to want it to end. Their happy shouts and chatter echoed in the house, and even Annie and Mikasa were in stitches when Eren and Jean were playing video games and Eren accidentally threw his controller into Jean's face during a victory dance. Jean looked like he'd received a black eye from a three hundred pound body builder, rather than some awkward maniac throwing a pad around.

“Awww, poor baby,” Eren said with a bright smile as he started to clamber onto Jean's lap. “I'll kiss it better for you, if it'll help,” he said, knowing Jean was going to throw a fit in three, two -

“Jeager, if you kiss me I will shove this controller so far up your ass that – augh!”

A chorus of laughter sprang from the girls as Eren pinned Jean and leaned in, giving him a loud, smacking kiss on his squished-shut eye.

“Kids,” Levi's voice cut through the amusement, and everyone whipped their heads around to look at him.

Eren was still in mount on top of Jean on the floor, one knee on either side of his stomach, when he met Levi's eyes.

Levi gave them all a disinterested stare. “I hate to break up the sleepover, but if you think you're staying up all night, you'd be sorely mistaken. What time is breakfast?”

“Seeeeven,” they all droned in the same tone.

“Wow, you have memories past that of a goldfish. Gold star.” Levi jerked a thumb in the direction of the stairs. “We're not running a fucking frat house here, so everyone shut up and go to bed.”

“You're the worst dad,” Annie said with an eye roll as she lurched from the couch and slunk past Levi.

“This is me caring. Go to bed, you have school in the morning. As for the rest of you brats. Jean?”
Jean sat up and shoved Eren off of him, then looked to Mikasa, who raised her eyebrows. “I'm staying,” Jean said, finally.

“Whatever. Just don't be loud. Some people need their beauty rest. Eren?” Levi crooked a finger, and Eren's heart went from resting to jackhammer. “Come with me.”

Jean snorted. “Don’t be too loud.” When Levi glowered at him with the menace of a mass murderer, Jean swallowed hard and said in a high-pitched tone, “Sorry.”

When Eren and Levi were both in the confines of the dark hallway, Levi leaned in, his chin tilted just enough that Eren's mind scattered.

“Go get the stuff and come down to my room. No one will bother us there.”

Eren was glad for the dim lighting of the corridor, otherwise Levi would have seen his face go up in flame. So he just nodded solemnly and went upstairs to retrieve the shoebox from the foot of his bed.

Moments later, he was standing in front of the door of Levi's room, wondering what to do. He'd never seen inside it, and remembered his first day when he was told it was strictly forbidden. That day felt like years ago.

Eren knocked quietly, painfully aware that the house was silent and everyone was seemingly asleep, or on their way to it. Even though the reasons behind his coming to Levi's room were purely innocent, there was something about doing this that made him feel like he should be hiding.

Then Levi was opening the door to him, clad in black sweatpants and a red and black t-shirt with a name of a band Eren didn't recognise. He looked so normal, and at the same time, painfully striking. Eren would have thought that without the sharp suits, Levi would look more approachable. Instead, Eren found his awareness of Levi's physical presence only heightened. His arms were sculpted with firm, smooth muscle, and down to the elbows were a series of intricate black and grey tattoos that looked like serpents, skulls, dragons, and fire.

Eren jerked his gaze away from Levi and pushed inside.

He wasn't surprised to find the room pristine. Not a wrinkle in the bed spread. The sheets were grey and white stripes, and looked surprisingly soft and cosy. The furniture was slick and mostly bare. There was a picture frame face-down on the dresser. A set of shelves, books neatly arranged in author order, lined the entirety of one wall.

“Are you done?” Levi said from behind him.

Eren was pleased that he didn't jump out of his skin. He looked over his shoulder with nervous smile. “Sorry, yeah. I just expected it to be...”

Levi raised his eyebrows, waiting.

“Less normal.”

Levi just stared at him. “Sure. Well, let's get this over with.”

Eren nodded, fingertips denting the thin cardboard of the box with the force of holding it so tightly. “Yeah.”

Not seeing anywhere else to sit, Eren chose the edge of the bed. Levi plopped down beside him with
surprisingly little grace, crossing one leg over the other.

Perplexed, Eren blinked down at Levi’s feet. “Your toenails are painted black.”

Levi looked down and wiggled said toes. “Yeah, last time I checked.”

A slow smile spread across Eren's face as he beamed at Levi’s feet with glee. “Do you always do that?”

“Oh, Reminds me of who I was.”

Eren turned his smile to Levi. “And that would be?”

Levi’s mouth quirked briefly. “Another day, brat. Stop avoiding the topic.”

Pouting, Eren drummed his fingers on the shoebox. “I'm not doing it on purpose. I don't hide from shit.”

“Yeah, I’ve gotten that impression. So, get on with it.”

Eren nodded and, without fanfare, flicked the top over and let it drop to the floor.

Peering inside with a frown, he plucked out a scuffed and worn-looking rosary. Eren had never really seen many rosaries in his life, but this one was beautiful, with each bead made of pearl, and the cross in sturdy silver. He handed it off to Levi, who slipped it between his fingers like he'd been handling one his entire life.

The second piece clattering around the shoebox was a ring. It looked like a man's ring, thick and fat with a large obsidian stone gracing the top. Eren slipped it on one of his fingers and found it to be too large. He didn't get a feeling off it or anything – and since this morning, when Erwin had told him that as a child Eren had been sensitive to things, he was trying to see if he could pick anything up from the items. This one was a dud.

Eren dropped the ring in Eren’s palm, already searching out the last piece. A simple chain of dulled gold glinted at the bottom of the shoebox. Eren took it and held up in the air – the chain was long, and the large, brass skeleton key swung in front of his face.

Eyes widened and -

“What's that, Mommy?”

“Your daddy brought it home for me, Eren. Do you like it?”

“Can I touch?”

“Of course, darling.”

“This is a BIG car key.”

“Hmm, you're right. Maybe it's for a giant's car?”

“A giant? Where did Daddy meet a giant?”

“I suppose you'll just have to ask him, won’t you?”

“I will, I will, I will! Can I have this, Mommy?”
“When you're older, Erry. We can share it.”

“Really?”

“Really, my darling. It'll be between you and me.”

“Oiy, Jaeger!” Levi was standing between Eren's knees, leaning in, searching Eren's face. “Christ, where the hell are you going?”

“Shit,” Eren snapped, sucking in a harsh, burning breath, like he'd been underwater, near drowning point. His peripheral vision was fuzzy as his eyes darted over Levi's features, taking him in, making sure he was real. That this was real. “This is real.”

“Fucking right, it's real,” Levi said a severe frown, his eyebrows dropping low. “What happened?”

“I – hm.” Eren looked down at the chain draped in his hand, felt it's weight. Familiar.

Levi snatched the shoebox from Eren's lap and sat down beside him once more. He looked sour and supremely pissed off. “So?”

“So, I recognise this,” Eren said softly, just shy of unsure of his words. What if he'd just made all that up? But surely he wouldn't hallucinate such a seemingly mundane conversation. “My mom wore it for years before she died. She told me she'd give it to me when I was older.”

A sharp pang stabbed at his heart. Well, he was older now.

“It doesn't feel, like...” Eren cocked his head and turned the key before his almost crossed eyes. “Evil, or anything.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Because now I know what evil looks like. What it feels like.”

To that, Levi remained silent.

Without thinking twice, Eren drew the necklace over his head and let the comforting weight of the skeleton key lay against his sternum. He released a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

Looking to Levi, Eren saw that he had plucked out the only remaining item in the box. An old recording tape. Although it didn't take someone with a special gift to know that there wouldn't be music on it when they played it.

“What do you think -”

“We still record our exorcisms,” Levi said softly. He was frowning down at it, shifting it from one hand to the other in a nervous gesture that felt completely unlike him. To Eren, Levi was infallible at all times. “Although,” Levi continued after a time, “Your father shouldn't have one. It's purely for church records, and not for the public. Not for doctors either, even if they attended the exorcism. If his basement is filled with these things, he's in for a shitload of legal hell.”

“I don't really care,” Eren found himself saying. Part of him immediately felt guilty for voicing the thought, and the other part of him was still blind with rage over what his father had kept from him, and what Eren had consequently been put through.

“Well, if you don't care, then I don't.”
“That's one of the nicest things you've ever said to me.”

Levi scoffed. “We've known each other like a week, kid.”

Eren rammed his shoulder against Levi's. “Not a kid.”

“Brat.”

“Maybe. Although I'd prefer something that expressed my age a little more.”

Levi shifted to face Eren, bringing one folded leg up on the bed between them. He considered Eren with an inscrutable look. “Insufferable, stubborn -”

"Sounds like you."

"Brash, insolent, tenacious -"

“Tenacious is a compliment.”

“Not when you're as annoying as you are with it.”

“Well -”

Levi held up the tape between two fingers. “There isn't a tape player in the house. We've moved on to digital recordings. We can pick up a player tomorrow morning.”

Eren nodded, invading Levi's space to take the tape from him and drop it in the box. With his head bowed, he looked into the shoebox – so little was left of his mother. The tape had to reveal something more.

Forgetting how close he truly was to Levi, when Eren looked up, his forehead brushed Levi's lips. Levi snapped back just an inch, face stony, while his gaze snapped from Eren's mouth to eyes.

Eren held his breath, going still under the simmering heat of Levi's scrutiny. “Today...” Eren said, this husky tone of his voice inwardly startling him.

Blinking as if slapped from his thoughts, Levi said, “What?”

“Earlier today. You were gonna kiss me.”

Levi's eyes widened, but he didn't move. He looked poised to run, though. “Hell no. You were going to kiss me and I stopped you from embarrassing yourself.”

“I'm not an idiot, Levi,” Eren said, mounting his courage. He'd been useless enough in high school. He wasn't going to go through life wishing he'd said or done certain things that may turn out to matter.

“Actually, you're acting like one right now.”

“I'm not an idiot,” Eren repeated, his voice gaining strength. “And I'm not blind. But I don't know how to do this kind of stuff. I don't know how to do things in the way you're supposed to do them in movies. Slow and graceful, or waiting for a romantic moment, or knowing the right words to say. I just know that I can't remember ever liking someone as much as I do you. I hardly know you, which I think says a lot for how much I do feel.”
Eyes going hooded, Eren slouched forward, his nose brushing Levi's, their lips a sigh apart. “And since you're not kicking me in the jaw and knocking out teeth right now, I'm gonna go out on a limb and say you might like me too. Even if it's just a little bit and you're just super horny because priests can't get any.”

“You're right,” Levi said, his voice sounding shockingly breathless, rough, and fucked-out. “You've never known the right words.”

Eren was first conscious of the sound of the shoebox topping to the floor, it's contents skittering and skating across the hardwood.

Then there was the wet, insistent inferno of Levi's mouth, and strong hand branding the nape of Eren's neck, pulling him closer while Levi's free palm cradled Eren's jaw.

Eren's moan came as freely as breathing, his body flaring to life like Levi had struck it to flame with this single urgent press of lips. Levi wasn't rough with his touch, but firm, purposefully licking Eren's mouth open, tasting him and taking him in like Eren was someone on which time should be taken.

Before Eren could curve his body against Levi's, or do anything more than place a hand on Levi's chest and soak in the rapid thud of his pulse, Levi let go of Eren's neck and wrapped his fist around the key dangling between them. Levi pulled Eren forward by the trinket and ended the kiss with the faintest murmur and a lingering nip to Eren's bottom lip.

Pulling back and releasing his hold on Eren's necklace, Levi looked at him with what might have been a callous expression, were it not for the blown black pupils and bruised pink mouth.

“Don't look at me like that, Eren.”

“Like what?” Eren said, his voice absolutely ravaged as he slipped his hand along Levi's chest, up his neck, and began to brush his fingers over Levi's raspy, shaved undercut.

Levi aimed an aloof stare his way, even as his head just slightly tilted into his hand. “Like you want me to fuck you into oblivion.”

Eren's breath hitched and came out as a sigh.

Levi gritted his teeth. “Don't do that either. Oi!” He smacked Eren's hand away. “That was a one off. Your curiosity has been sated, kid, so don't expect it to happen again. I don't do relationships and I definitely don't do Eren Jaeger.

With that, Levi stood stiffly and moved to pick up the lost items from the floor. He dropped them loudly in the shoebox, while Eren just watched him in a daze. Had he just been kissed brainless by an intensely sexy and intimidating holy man?

Why yes, yes he had.

Eren was glad he'd made it out of high school and to this point in his life.

“Stop daydreaming,” Levi snapped and shoved the box in Eren's hands. He physically yanked Eren from his seat and began to push him to the door.

With his fist clenched white-knuckled on the doorknob, Levi flung it open and held it there, waiting for Eren to move.

Eren turned to face Levi and chewed on his bottom lip. “Was this a booty call?”
If looks could kill.

“You're an idiot. Goodnight. Tomorrow I'll get you a tape player. I said goodnight.”

Before Eren could think up a rebuttal, the door was shut in his face and Eren was left in the hallway, in the dark.

Well, he was in the dark in more ways than one.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

I don't even know what to say about this chapter. A LOT OF SHIT GOES DOWN. IT IS DRAINING.

Just a reminder that I'm atomicblonde on Tumblr if you want to have a chat.

“Oh, you're perfect, Eren,” a rich, female voice purred into the void. “And you're only getting better.”

Distant, unhinged laughter broke through Eren's slumber and had him choking for air. He shot up in bed and searched the room with wild eyes. Cold sweat pooled at the small of his back, his mind whirling in dizzying circles.

“H-hello?” Eren said quietly.

Shit, he felt like he was going to puke. The familiar twisting, slimy knot in his stomach that leached away his energy was one he recalled experiencing when he'd touched the demon inside of Annie.

“Hello?” Eren said again, urging strength into his voice.

“Eren?” Armin's voice nearly had Eren flying off the bed.

“Jesus Christ!” Eren slapped a hand over his heart and eyed Armin warily.

He stood at the foot of the bed, looking on with concern. “No, just me.”

“Ha-ha. Good to know people keep their senses of humour in the afterlife. What're you doing here?”

“I heard you.” Armin was blatantly frowning at Eren.

“What's wrong?”

“I tried to tell you before, in the kitchen. There's something going on with you and I don't know what it is.”

Eren's throat felt tight, his heart feeling heavy and overweight with dread. “How do you know?”

“There's this mist around your head,” Armin said with a narrowed look. “Like a halo.”

Eren reached up and tugged a hand through his hair and felt nothing unusual. “Okay?”

“But dark. Swirling around your crown like – like a black hole or something.”

“Oh, good,” Eren said sourly. “You're saying I have a fucking evil as shit halo around my head. That can only mean good things.” Eren shoved off his blankets and shot from his bed, erratically pacing the floor. “Aren't I supposed to be helping people with this gift?”

“Eren, I -”
“Armin, I'm scared.” Eren wrapped his arms around himself, blunt nails digging into his elbows. “And that pisses me the fuck off. I shouldn't have to be scared. I've got a gift that could do a lot of good and – and what, you're seeing some fucking thing hovering over me? I've seen evil on Erwin and they look like they want to tear him apart slowly, piece by piece. Is that what's going to be my end?”

A warm, soft embrace wrapped around Eren's back. Hands, humming with bright, soothing energy, gripped Eren's folded arms. Armin squeezed Eren tight, and Eren could swear he felt Armin's pure, shining essence seep into his muscles, soothing his twisting soul.

Eren sighed and sagged back into Armin's comforting hold – and fell right through him and tumbled to the floor.

“Ow.” Eren sat up and rubbed the back of his head, frowning up at Armin. “What happened there?”

“I gave you some of myself, to combat the dark,” Armin said with a half smile, a sad smile. “Guess it took more out of me than I'd anticipated.”

“You – you what?” Eren jumped to his feet and went to grab Armin, but his hands went straight through a cool, damp mist. “Don't you ever do that again, Armin! If it means losing yourself, I'd rather battle this thing alone.”

“Don't let yourself think that you have to be alone in this, Eren. I'm already... I'm already dead,” Armin said, his voice hushed and breathless. He looked exhausted. “The least I can do is be of some good to you. You're going to make a difference. I don't know how, exactly, but I just know it. Trust me, okay?”

“Of course I trust you,” Eren snapped, on edge with upset over Armin's deteriorating condition. “Just... take care of yourself. I don't want to lose you. I know we haven't know each other for long, but -”

“There's just something about you,” Armin finished for him, with a slow, genuine smile. “I know. I feel it too. Weird how I'd find my best friend long after I'd passed on.”

“Long? So you've been gone a long time?”

“I – actually, no. I don't know. I don't remember.” Wincing, Armin brought a hand to his temples. “I'm sorry, Eren. I have to rest. I nee-” And, like a light had flicked off, he was gone.

Eren stared at the wallpaper blankly, his fists clenched at his sides.

Well, what a fucking way to wake.

He wouldn't let it get him down, though. There were more important things to address today. His mother's tape.

Eren got his shower out of the way, dressed in a simple flannel and jeans, and pulled on the key necklace, tucking it into the collar of his shirt. It warmed against his skin, like it belonged there.

Scowling the entire way downstairs, Eren's expression was caught in a state of annoyance when he walked into the dining room.

“There's the new man in my life!” Hanji's booming voice startled Eren as much as her mere presence did.
Eren blinked, noting that the dining room table was completely full this morning. Hanji, Father Erwin, and Levi sat at one end of the table, while Annie, Jean, and Mikasa took up the rest of the seats. Someone had cooked up piles of fluffy, steaming waffles, and the table was strewn with toppings of syrup, whipped cream, and fresh fruit.

Everyone looked blissfully happy.

And Eren was... not so much.

“I'm going to... coffee,” Eren said, giving a half wave of recognition to the table and wandering out of the room.

Making a beeline for the half-full pot of coffee on the centre island, Eren scraped a mug across the countertop towards himself, and poured. Large windows faced the back yard, and he blearily stared out at what looked like another beautiful day.

But this morning still clung to him like being caught in a frigid storm with no umbrella. Eren was dripping with dread.

“Sulking?” Levi said from behind him.

Eren didn't bother to turn. “Just thinking.”

“About?”

“There's a fucking shopping list, Levi.” Eren slipped onto one of the bar stools at the island and cupped his palms around the warmed mug.

“You're not just being a little bitch about last night?” Levi said, shouldering up beside him on the other stool.


The kiss had been amazing. Fucking blissful. If Eren wasn't going to attempt to be a Catholic or whatever, he'd have thought Levi would become his new religion. With the way the guy could kiss, it wasn't out of the question.

Sure, it hadn't ended well – but a lot of things in Eren's life didn't end well, and he just found a way around that. Eren really liked Levi as a person. His sense of humour, his diligence in his duties, his sharp mind and quick tongue, and the way his crass manner brought out peoples' genuine feelings and personalities.

So, Eren wasn't about to just sit back and give up. At the same time, he had more things on his mind than a growing crush.

Levi blinked and went silent. It was then that Levi noticed the soft bruises that normally smudged beneath Levi's inky bottom lashes were darker than usual.

“You okay?” Eren said, taking a sip of his coffee. “You sleep badly or something?”

“I'm fine,” Levi said gruffly. “So, today's plans have changed.”

Eren shot to attention, further focussing on Levi. “The hell does that mean?”

“It means that Hanji wants you for her experiments today.”
Eren’s face dropped. “Oh. And what does that mean?”

“It means she’s taking you to an exorcism to test your abilities.”

It took a conscious effort not to drop his mug on the floor in shock. Eren gaped. “What, like testing on a real live person?”

“I’d hope they wouldn’t be dead before you got there.”

Eren chewed on his lip, biting the first tender layer of skin off as he thought this over. “What if I fuck it up or something? What if the person gets hurt or I accidentally kill them? I don’t know shit about my limitations at this point, Levi. Annie was... I just winged it with her.”

“Hence, you needing practice so that you can increase your skill.” Levi shifted in his seat to fully face Eren, drilling him with an intense look. “You remember what I said about my faith in you.”

Eren could feel his cheeks heat as he nodded. “Yeah.”

“And Erwin and Hanji will be there the entire time. You won’t be on your own.”

“Wait, what? You’re not going to be there?”

Levi pushed himself away from the island and stood, busying himself with brushing out the creases in his slacks. “I don’t have any reason to be there.”

“What about me?”

Levi stared at Eren with one eyebrow slowly climbing. “You’re the one who keeps reminding me what an adult you are. So suck it the fuck up and act like one when it actually matters. Anyway, I told you I don’t do that shit anymore.”

Levi turned away, and Eren was on his feet, reaching out to briefly touch Levi’s wrist. “Levi?”

Without looking at Eren, Levi sighed. “I hate it when I know you’re going to ask me something fucking stupid and undoubtedly invasive.”

“Will you tell me why you quit sometime? Please.”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because you matter.”

A beat of tense silence passed between them, and then Levi was using long strides to exit the kitchen and go back to the boisterous dining room.

Eren sighed and scrubbed both hands over his face. What a morning.

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“Where are we going?” Eren said after a good fifteen minutes of his own silence in the car.

Hanji seemed perfectly content to blab to Father Erwin as he drove along at two miles above the speed limit. They seemed to have a long history, and Father Erwin appeared content to ask Hanji about her work and personal life and smile to himself at her long-winded replies. He almost looked approachable.
Hanji whipped around in her seat, grinning broadly at Eren. “Oh, this is a good one. He's had a failed exorcism already, so this'll be a doozy. With exorcisms, the longer the demon infests the vessel, the more difficult it becomes to extricate without severe harm or, in some cases, death.”

Eren's eyes widened. “Isn't that – I mean, aren't you putting too much faith in me, then? This is only my second time.”

“Oh, bless your little cotton socks! It'll be fine. Well, maybe. Maybe you'll kill him. I don't know. My thought is that Annie's demon was fresh popped in her oven, so it would have been easier to pull it out. This one has been cooking for a while, so I don't know how much luck you'll have. Although, I haven't actually seen you do your thing, and Levi was an unhelpful little shit, at best, so I'll draw plenty more conclusions once I watch you work your magic.”

“And if it doesn't work?” Eren said softly.

“That's my job,” Father Erwin said. “Try not to worry, Eren.”

“Someone's life is in my hands. I think I'm allowed to be worried.”

“It gets easier to separate yourself from the doubt as you gain experience. You are interested in pursuing this, aren't you? Levi informed me that you wanted to start going to church so that you could understand what we do.”

“Yeah, I do. Want to pursue this, I mean. I want to make a difference.” Eren stared balefully out the window and watched streams of gold and green corn fields fly by. “But I don't want to kill anybody.”

“Eh,” Hanji said with terrifying cheerfulness. “It happens to the best of us.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, of course. You can't save everyone. You can only try.”

Eren wondered if Levi had experienced such a trauma before. He supposed it was inevitable. But still, awful.

“So, this guy? What should I know about him?”

“Honestly?” Father Erwin said. “The less you know, the easier it'll be to do your job.”

Eren made a face at the back of Father Erwin's head, then remembered he could probably be seen in the rearview mirror.

With his face frying, Eren slunk down in the seat and decided not to talk anymore.

“Sooo,” Hanji said, with what sounded like a laugh in her voice. “Levi seems to have taken to you.”

Eren went still. “Uh. I guess? I was kind of an especially fucked up case from day one, so he's pretty much had to watch over me all the time. Stupid stuff happens to me all the time – and that's before I became a psychic,” Eren said with a nervous, forced laugh.

“Yeah, but -” Hanji turned, and her eyes gleamed as she inspected Eren. “I mean, he like likes you.”

Avoiding eye-contact, Eren looked down at his jeans and picked at a hole in the knee. “What d'you mean?”
“I mean, he actually told to me that you had serious potential. He’s never said anything like that to me before.”

“Well, that's nice of him,” Eren said with what he hoped was as little obvious interest as possible.

“I don't actually remember the last time someone called Levi nice,” Hanji said. She looked to Father Erwin. “You?”

“Can't say I recall.”

“Jeez, Eren, what have you two been doing to see Levi's nice side?”

Eren knew he was a perfectly competent adult, but right now all he wanted to do was melt into the seat and dissipate into the endless void. “Um. We talk?”


“S-sometimes? Uh, so, have you guys known each other long?” If Eren were the praying sort, he'd be asking God to help him change this damned conversation.

Hanji’s laugh was throaty and filled the car. “Yeah, us guys have definitely known each other long.”

Eren frowned. “Did I say something funny?”

Peering over her shoulder, Hanji sent Eren a wink. “Just that I did use to be a guy. Ah, those were the days. But yeah, Erwin and Levi have been together for, what -”

“He was eighteen, so it's been something like fourteen years,” Father Erwin said. He sighed, long and deep. “Now I feel old. Thanks, Hanji.”

“Hey, blame it on Eren! You know I never bring up our ages. I'm very vain, can't you tell?” she said, roaming her hands through her wild mass of a ponytail.

“Sorry,” Eren said.

Still, he wanted to hear more. Know more about Levi, about everyone.

Hanji blew him off with a wave of a hand. “Don't worry, we're only half serious. Anywho, I hooked up with Big and Small when Levi and I were in our early twenties. Levi had just become an actual priest, but was Erwin's shadow for a few years, and I was working on a paper about the scientific reality of exorcisms. And, y'know, we all hit it off.”

“How that happened still perplexes me,” Father Erwin said with a hint of a smile.

“Hey, I was fucking charming.”

“You had a pocket protector.”

“Ummm, which I Bedazzled? It was amazing, so you can suck my dick.”

“Wait,” Eren said. “Sorry, but I have to ask. When I met you, you said you hated the name Zoe. So why don't you change it?”

“Ugh.” Hanji dropped her face onto the dashboard with way more force than was necessary. “When I decided to come out as a female, we all put three name suggestions per person in a hat to choose at
random. Because I'm a fucking useless idiot when it comes to real world applications of logic. So, I'd chosen all these badass lady names, like Maxima and Cordelia and Theodora."

"Thank the Lord you did not pick any of those," Father Erwin said.

Hanji shot him a half-hearted glare. "And then this asshole decides to put in the names that he would have picked for his non-existent children? Like, who does that? And Levi put in douchebag names, like Shitty Glasses – but yeah, I ended up with Erwin's fucking never-alive daughter's name. And it's not like I was going to go back on my word, right? That would've been even worse. But let's be honest, I'd rather be Shitty Glasses."

Before Eren realised could help himself, he was laughing. "Wow. Well, I'm glad I asked, at least."

Despite their destination, the remainder of their drive was a lot more enjoyable than Eren imagined it would be.

"So," Hanji said, her tone shifting to something more curt and business-like. She reached into the backpack at her feet and pulled out that familiar notebook she'd been scribbling in the day before. "I'll be asking you questions the entire time, to record your experience in as great detail as possible. I'll ask you to try a few things on the vessel."

"The person -"

"That's what I mean. I want to know what you can and can't do, at this point, and if there's room for improvement."

Eren shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He really didn't want to do anything that would hurt anyone. He could only remind himself that this guy he was going to meet was already in the worst position possible and that if he concentrated and put his all into it, Eren could actually end up doing some good.

"I'll do whatever I need to."

"Good. Because we're here."

Eren sat up straight and peered out the window at a normal, suburban two-story. There were a couple of cars parked in the driveway, so he expected they'd have company.

Father Erwin parked on the street and they all got out of the car. Hanji slung an arm around Eren's shoulders and gave him a squeeze. "You'll be fine."

Nodding solemnly, because he found he couldn't speak, Eren trailed behind Father Erwin. He knocked, and a small woman with bleary, bloodshot eyes answered the door.

"Mrs. Hoover?" Father Erwin said in a smooth, reassuring tone. "We're from the church. May we come in?"

Mrs. Hoover gestured for them to come inside. They followed, and she shut the door quietly behind them.

"I'm Father Erwin, this Dr. Hanji, and this is our assistant, Eren. How are you faring?"

"What do you expect?" Mrs. Hoover said, her voice watery, but clear. "The last people sent here failed, and my baby boy has been strapped to his bed for almost twenty-four hours. We had to tie his wrists because he kept trying to peel off his skin. He keeps screaming for me, but it's not his voice."
She looked at Eren, straight through him, like she didn't see him at all. “It's not him in there.”

“I understand your frustration with the situation, Mrs. Hoover, and we’ll do everything in God's power to save Bertolt. Will you bring us to him?”

Nodding, Mrs. Hoover led them upstairs, gripping the bannister with white-knuckled fingers. The house looked so average. Clean, white walls lined with family photographs. Beige carpet, a distressed cat toy laying in the hallway, the distant smell of potpourri.

When they reached the second floor, Eren didn't need to be shown which door Bertolt was behind. A heavy air, like steam sweating off burning summer asphalt, rose from the crack at the bottom of the door. Eren wondered if that's what the gateway to hell looked like. He concluded it would be much worse.

Mrs. Hoover had frozen at the top step, seemingly unable to go any further.

Eren edged around everyone and wandered over to the door. “This one?” he said.

“Y-yes. How did you know?”

Eren couldn't meet her eyes as he shrugged. His hand closed around the doorknob, when Mrs. Hoover said, “What is your purpose here, anyway? I know what these two do, but why are you in my house?”

“Oh.” Eren tried to stamp down his panic, looking between Mrs. Hoover and Father Erwin.

The latter merely nodded. “He's a specialist in the supernatural.”

Eren frowned, mulling that over for a second. He liked it. “Yeah, I'm the specialist.”

Mrs. Hoover seemed to accept this. She was already taking a step back. “Well, I'll leave you, then. Bertl's best friend is sitting with him. Hasn't left his side since it all began, three days ago. Bless him.”

Eren waited until Mrs. Hoover had gone downstairs. He looked to Father Erwin and Hanji, took a breath, and opened the door.

An assault of seething, sinister energy punched Eren in the gut. He was struck still, eyes wide and hands shaking, as he surveyed the toxic room. Bertl was on the bed, his wrists tied to the bars of his headboard. He wasn't alone – and Eren wasn't taking into account the person who sat at his bedside.

Bertl's face was more horrifying than Annie's was. His toothy, skinless grin stretched from ear to ear. He had to have three times as many teeth as a normal human, and a mouth that cut straight across his strong jaw. When Bertl – no, the demon – when the demon saw him, it tossed it's skinless, hairless head back with a blood-curdling, hysterical laugh.

Eren felt his veins go cold. He couldn't move, couldn't escape. This thing wasn't like Annie. This thing was so much worse.

“Eren?” a familiar, incredulous voice said.

Eren managed to rip his gaze from the menacing monstrosity that licked it's teeth in his direction, and zoom in on the person sitting beside the bed.
“Reiner?” The guy from Pizza Hut? Oh Jesus Christ, what the hell was his life, anymore? “What are you -”

“I'm pretty sure I should be asking you that. Who the hell are you?”


“I'm – I'm – a – uh, specialist? In -” he vaguely gestured to the demon. “This stuff.”

Reiner looked like he hadn't slept in days. His closely shorn hair was in disarray and several empty soda cans were strewn about his feet, as if he hadn't left that spot in a while. He narrowed his eyes at Eren. “Fine. But if you hurt him, I hurt you.”

Eren put his hands up in a gesture of peace. “If I hurt him, then I'd welcome the pain.”

The demon cackled and howled, kicking it's feet and tugging against the restraints. “Come here, pretty thing. Let me tell you something about your Mama. She's down here with me, you know. Screaming. So disappointed in what you've become.”

Father Erwin stepped in beside Eren. “Reiner, was it? I'm going to have to ask you to vacate the room.”

“What? But I -”

“I'm afraid that's non-negotiable,” Father Erwin said, coming around to Reiner to loom above him. “Now, please.”

Features twisted in barely repressed anger, Reiner stood to his full height and was actually able to face Father Erwin eye to eye. “That's my best friend. I don't care if you're a man of the cloth or whatever. Anything happens to him on your watch, and you're to pay.”

With that, Reiner stalked out the room, his shoulder jolting against Eren.

Hanji shut the door with a quiet click, sidling up beside Eren as they watched Father Erwin murmur prayers and cross himself.

“So?” Hanji said, her attention glued to the creature that grinned back. “What do you see?”

“Um. Before we reached the door, I could see this... heat come from the bottom gap by the floor. It's in here, too, but it's coming from that thing, like steam rising off it's body.”

“It? What do you see when you look at that guy, Eren?”

“Skinless. It's Bertl's body, but it's not. It's like he's wearing the demon – or the other way around. I don't know what Bertl looks like – only this thing.”

“Can you draw it?”

Eren took a deep breath. “Maybe later.”

“What else? Do you hear, smell?”

“Rot. They always smell like rotting meat and – and, I dunno, sulfur or something. And, um, the same as with Annie, it sounds like two voices overlapping. But it's dissonant – it makes my ears ache.”
Hanji's scribbled frantically. “Touch it,” she said under her breath.

“Huh?”

“Touch it's arm or something. I wanna see if there's some kind of immediate reaction.”

“Sure.” Eren rounded the side of the bed, opposite from the side where Father Erwin stood, murmuring his prayers like a low, melodic hum.

Without looking the demon in the eye, Eren grabbed it's wrist, just below where it was tethered to the headboard. Thick, visceral nausea plunged down Eren's throat and slithered in his stomach. The demon keened, deafening and shrill beside Eren.

Eren dropped to his knees beside the bed, his fingernails digging into the demon's arm. God, how he wanted to let go. How he wanted to run and abandon all of this.

The desperation in Reiner's face swam before his wavering vision. Eren thought of Levi's faith in him. He considered how aimless he'd felt his entire life. Useless and following the demands of his father by rote.

This was Eren's choice. This was the first thing he'd ever really pursued because he'd wanted it. How could he turn his back on people in need when he had the ability to change their lives?

Swallowing down the sickly bile that rose up, Eren struggled to his feet and flicked a glance to Hanji. She looked enraptured.

“Touching them is like touching poison,” Eren said, struggling for every word. He felt like he'd drunk too much, like he could keel over at any moment. “It makes me sick.” He looked to the demon and met it's lidless eyes. “Hear that, buddy? You make me sick. And now it's my turn to do the same to you.”

Distantly, Eren heard Hanji yell, “Wait! Eren, I'm not fini-”

Eren lunged forward, teeth bared as he wrapped both hands around the demon's neck. Every thought was stripped from him, as if someone had ripped him to shreds and left only the anger, the pain, the desire to destroy.

The demon's howling pounded on the walls like a storm, it's screams battering against Eren's frame. Eren shut his eyes tightly, feeling the slip and slide of the tar-like entity that lurked just beneath the skin. This wasn't like Annie – Eren had been able to see that demon shifting in and out and around Annie's body. This one had made itself comfortable.

“There you are,” Eren hissed, and yanked.

“Eren,” Hanji's voice boomed into his consciousness. “You're choking him! Let go, let go.”

Eren didn't have it in him to reply. His eyes were crushed closed, his face contorted as he pulled again, feeling the thing slither between his fingers like maggots, like worms.

He was thinking too hard, Eren realised. With Annie, he'd just followed instinct. This wasn't something physical Eren could hold. He thought of Armin. He thought of Armin's arms wrapped around him, the energy which had touched his soul.

Taking a deep breath and ignoring the screams of both Hanji and the demon, Eren looked. Really looked for that black, shifting mist. He couldn't physically see, but his mind's eye – that third eye
Hanji had once spoken of – could.

And there it was. Like a serpent having wrapped itself around Bertl's limbs, feeding on everything good about him.

With a manic smile, Eren gripped it and ripped it out.

The shriek that filled the room cracked at Eren's skull as he fell back, as if hit with a sonic boom. He felt the demon's energy batter against his body before it snapped out of existence.

Breathing hard, Eren blinked at the ceiling. The edges of his vision were growing dark and he rolled over suddenly, vomiting all over the carpet. Distantly, he could hear someone crying – Bertl, normal, human Bertl by the sound of his voice – and Father Erwin's comforting voice saying something to the victim.

Rolling onto his back, Eren found himself staring up at a very fuzzy Hanji. A dazed smile lingered on Eren's numb lips.

“Did it,” he said, before darkness consumed him. Before he sunk too deep, he could swear he heard a woman laughing.

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Eren rocketed from sleep with a yell, and fell onto a cold, hardwood floor.

“Fuck, Jaeger,” Levi's snapping voice was a blessing to Eren's ears. “Who the hell wakes up like that? You're fucking useless.”

Eren moaned and didn't actually move from the floor. The cool planks felt heavenly on his pounding temples.

“That's all you have to say for yourself? Get the hell up.”

Before Eren could even attempt something so complicated as standing, two hands were wedging in his armpits. Levi literally dragged him to his feet.

Eren squinted blearily at Levi and said nothing. Forming sentences felt out of his league. Instead, he sighed, tipped forward, and propped his forehead on Levi's shoulder.

Levi went stiff for a second, then relaxed. One warm hand rested on Eren's hip, steadying his slight sway.

“You've only been out for a couple of hours,” Levi said tightly. “But Hanji reported your actions. You fucked yourself up, Eren. How many times do you think you can do this before you -”

“Is Bertholdt okay?” Eren said, his voice husky with exhaustion. “That's his name, right?”

Levi sighed, his thumb absently brushing back and forth over Eren's shirt. “That's his name. He's not fine, but he's alive. I've called in a nurse to help watch over him. Hanji managed to convince his mother that he didn't need a hospital – which is true. He just needs time and rehydration.”

Still using Levi as a leaning post, Eren turned his head sightly, so that his nose brushed against the soft skin of Levi's neck. He smelled clean and perfect, like freshly washed sheets drying on a line in the sun.

“Are you sniffing me, you freak?”
“It's called breathing. Some humans do it.” Eren waited a beat. “So, I didn't really fuck up. I did what I was supposed to.”

Eren yelped as Levi physically shoved him back a few steps. Levi’s normally pale, porcelain skin was going blotchy red and his eyes shined like blades. “Fucking idiot child. See if anyone cares if you die next time. At least some random asshole you don't even know survived. You're such a fucking hero.”

“What, Levi?” Eren yelled, stomping into Levi's personal space. He jammed a finger against Levi's chest. “Are you telling me you wouldn't do the same? You're telling me that you'd let an innocent person die when you knew you could do something to save them? I don't believe that for one fucking second, and I know you don't either.”

Levi stared him down, his features gone stony and still. The only tell of anger was the twitch in his jaw.

Eren threw his hands up in the arm with a sound of exhaustion. "Didn't you tell me I needed practice this morning? Yes, I admit that when I realised this job was going to be too difficult, I should have asked for help, okay? But I didn't. And I managed it alone, and both me and Bertolt are alive and kicking."

“Fine.” Levi's voice was icy, and his eyes had shuttered to hold in any telling emotion. "Keep it up, Jaeger. Just don't die on my watch. Make sure you're out of this house before you manage that one.”

Levi slammed the door behind him, leaving Eren gaping at thin air. With a groan, Eren stumbled to the door and propped his head against it, his eyes squeezed shut.

What the hell was he supposed to do?
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Wow, okay, so many things.

1. I'm sorry I haven't replied to comments, as I usually do! These past few days have been no-good, very bad days that have left me super down and also super busy, so I wasn't able to get back to your beautiful and often hilarious words in time. PLEASE TO FORGIVE.
2. Due to shitty mcshitterson mood of mine, please could you leave me something nice? I could really use it right now.
3. Whenever there is a serious business chapter, I like to follow it up with a feel-good chapter, so you don't feel too down. Now, that won't always happen, but I try to when I can!
4. UM, I MADE KE$HA LYRICS MEANINGFUL, BECAUSE I AM A DICKHEAD.
5. You will want to click the links in this chapter, because it will just make your day.

Eren didn't know how long he stayed in his room, but the sun's setting glow was drifting through the lace curtain in splashes of soothing pink and tangerine. He knew it was probably time to stop imitating a hermit.

But he couldn't stop the demon's words from haunting him. Although Eren knew it had just been goading him, it niggled that it had spoken of his mother. Why would she be disappointed in him? What had Eren done wrong? He was putting his all into being someone of which his mom could be proud.

Sure, he was clumsy with people, swore too much, and had the patience of an ill-tempered five year old sometimes, but no one was perfect. Eren had forced himself to accept that reality when he'd left high school. He'd never be Mr. Popular, but if he just put in some effort, he'd found that he could be a good friend and a good person.

Eren scowled to himself as one particular friend came to mind. Levi had never really properly lost his temper with him in the short time they'd known each other, and Eren got the impression that Levi kept himself on a tight leash. The tongue lashing he'd received was probably not even close to what Levi could dish out.

Obviously, Levi was worried about someone he cared about. At least, Eren hoped that was the case. And if that was so, then Levi was seriously shit at expressing his emotions. No surprises there. While Eren didn't appreciate being yelled at like some kid, he also didn't feel like dwelling on it. Eren knew he had his own outbursts that he had to reign in. He could hardly judge.

But he could give Levi a hard time about it. Eren would have to devise a way to have Levi suffer a little – just until he learned it was okay to tell Eren he worried about him, rather than kick him in the face or something.

Levi had been right about one thing, though. If Eren couldn't figure out how to exorcise a demon without hurting himself every time, he was going to have to give it up altogether. That, or go down
fighting. And Eren would rather not die if he could help it. He'd seen the other side, and it wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Eren chose not to linger on the demon's other accusations. Dark angel. Black haloed boy.

Repressing a shudder, Eren blew out a long breath and got to his feet. His stomach rumbled, and he remembered with a wince how he'd barfed all over some poor old lady's house. He should probably take part in dinner with everyone else.

It was so easy to get into the habit of being alone. Eren recognised it from years of isolating himself. So, if he didn't want to have dinner with everyone, he knew he needed to have dinner with everyone.

Padding down the hall with bare feet, Eren noticed the door to Jean's room was open a crack. It was a strange concept to think that the person inhabiting Jean's old space was Bertolt. Not that Eren had spent any time in that room. It was just the concept of change that was weirding him out.

Peeking in, Eren noted from afar the pallid shade of Bertl's cheeks, and the IV his hand was hooked up to. He looked relatively peaceful. Maybe he was drugged up.

Noticing Bertl's bandaged arms, Eren winced as he recalled Mrs. Hoover explaining to them that her son had attempted to rip his own skin off.

Eren sighed and turned away, heading downstairs. He could already hear the ruckus.

The first thing Eren noticed was that Jean wasn't around anymore. The table was packed - again, with Levi, Erwin, and Hanji at one end and Mikasa and Annie at the other.

"Hey," Eren said with a meagre wave as he wandered in and slumped onto his chair. He sat next to Hanji, and at the head of the table beside him was Mikasa.

"You know," Mikasa said as she reached to grab the bowl of guacamole to add to her plate of homemade tacos, "I think in the week you've been here you've probably attended less meals at the table than you've actually attended."

She aimed a pointed look at him. Eren shied away from the eye contact and grabbed some taco shells from a platter.

"You're awful at being evasive," Mikasa said fondly, patting him on the hand. "Do you have a lying bone in your body?"

"It's all the eyes," Annie said blandly around a massive bite of taco.

Eren sputtered. "I - ugh. Why does this keep coming up? Like, most of us have been possessed by fucking demons at some point. Don't we have anything better to talk about?"

"Now that you mention it," Hanji said, leaning in and invading Eren's space like a pro. "Your eyes are fascinating. They're like tragic puppy dog eyes, but in this case on a seriously attractive package."

"Heel, dog face," Levi said, managing to take a neat bite of his food without spilling it everywhere.

"Ew," Annie said with little inflection. "You're practically old enough to be his mom."

The sound of Levi's taco dropping from his hand and clattering to his plate was deafening to Eren, but no one else seemed to notice.
"Well," Hanji said, clearly unperturbed, "It's a good thing I've still got a dick, which rules out having given birth to him." Hanji crept close to Eren's ear and said loud enough for the table to hear, "You could call me Daddy if you really wanted to, though."

Eren's face went redder than the salsa on the table and Hanji was debilitated with guffaws as she slammed her fist repeatedly on the table and gasped for air.

Father Erwin cleared his throat. "That's enough, Zoe."

"But he's so damn easy! Look at that face." She smacked Eren hard on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Eren. I'm just fuckin' with you."

"Oh good, thanks," Eren said dryly as he tried to concentrate on assembling his tacos.

"Annie's right, anyway. If I'd sired offspring at like age fifteen, you really could be my kid."

"Excuse me," Levi said, his chair screeching as he pushed back from the table and stood. "I'm getting a beer. Who wants?"

There were choruses of 'me!' plus other drink orders. Eren finally met Levi's eyes for the first time since he'd sat, and found them shielded.

Inwardly sighing, Eren also stood. "That's a big order. I'll help." Quickly, he added, "Anything to get away from these creeps."

Levi's reply was to stare at him blankly, grunt once, and walk out of the room.

Without looking back to the table, Eren followed.

He found Levi in the kitchen, standing with his head in the fridge.

"It's supposed to be the oven, if you're looking to kill yourself," Eren said, coming up behind him with hands tucked in pockets.

Without turning, Levi said, "You're a laugh fuckin' riot, kid."

Eren felt a familiar simmer of annoyance beneath his skin. Swiftly, he leaned in behind Levi, Eren's crotch fitted against the small of Levi's back. Eren brushed his lips against the pale shell of Levi's ear, and murmured, "Not a kid."

For the briefest moment, Eren was blissfully aware that Levi tilted his head toward Eren's mouth and shifted his hips further back. Then Levi was grabbing Eren's chin firmly between his fingers and turning. He jerked Eren in with the strength of his hold on Eren's jaw and narrowed his eyes, flinty gaze almost frantically searching Eren's expression.

"What do you want from me, brat? You wanna fuck and get it outta your system?"

Eren leaned into Levi's hand, daring him with his eyes to do something more. "I want you to admit that you like me more than you'd like to like me. I want you to admit that I matter."

With a scoff, Levi released Eren with a short shove. "I've known you like seven days, Eren. Get a fucking grip."

"You're the one who keeps losing your shit the minute I get a fucking papercut, Levi. Don't lecture me about what I feel. At least I can recognise it and stomach it, when all you do is choke on it."
Levi paused for too long, looking at Eren as if he'd never seen him before.

“I.”

“Hey, you gossiping bitches, get me drinks!” Hanji hollered from the other room.

Eren shot Levi a sharp look. “Don't be a coward, Levi. While most things look really damn good on you, that doesn’t.”

Pushing past Levi, Eren rummaged through the fridge and hooked his fingers around the necks of some beer bottles. With both hands full, he turned, and Levi was right behind him.

Eren's eyes widened when Levi stepped into his space, palm moving to cup the nape of Eren's neck. Encouraging him forward, Levi's lips met Eren's half way. A sigh swept it's way over Eren's tongue and Levi eagerly lapped it up, his lips coaxing every ounce of tension from Eren's frame.

Failing to bite back a whimper of frustration at not being able to touch, Eren allowed Levi to explore his mouth with warm, insistent kisses. Levi's fingers curled and bunched Eren's hair, and Eren distantly prayed that meant Levi was getting as lost as he was.

Levi's lips broke from Eren's, smoothed along his jaw with hot breath that hummed electricity over Eren's skin. The following nip at Eren's ear had him gasping, tilting forward, and -

“That feel like a coward to you, Jaeger?” Levi murmured, his voice scraped up and rough, like he'd run a mile.

“Feels like a distraction,” Eren said, using the split-second of Levi's mute fury to grab a swift, hard kiss.

Then Eren quickly evacuated the room, because this whole cool thing he was doing? Totally fucking fake.

The remainder of dinner was spent decidedly not looking at Levi. And if his ratio of beers to tacos ended up as three to one – well, after this week he probably deserved an entire bottle of vodka.

“Mikasa. Mikasa. Mee-kasaaa-”

“What, what, Eren?” Mikasa said with a flustered laugh as Eren draped an arm over her shoulder and led her out of the dining room, leaving others to clean up.

“I really think that... you need a haircut.”

Mikasa snorted. “Really, and why's that?”

“Well, can you actually see past your bangs?”

Mikasa snorted. “Really, and why's that?”

“Well, can you actually see past your bangs?”

“Not unless I want to.”

“Ah. I see what you did there. Smart. I wish my hair could stop me from socialisation.”

“I think it manages to in the morning. Someone would think a bird or rat is nesting in that wig.”

“You are... so unkind, Mikasa. Owwie.”

“And you are so drunk.” Mikasa backed up towards the couch, pulling Eren along by the hands until they'd both flopped onto the cushions. “Mind if I ask why?”
Eren began to count off on his fingers. “Well, first you drink one beer. Then -”

“I mean, I never pegged you as the type to just randomly get drunk. You kind of looked like you were knocking them back pretty fast. What's up?”

Eren's eyes widened to saucers as he swayed unsteadily forward and grabbed Mikasa's face, squishing her cheeks like a fishy. “You – are – so – smart. I thought you couldn't see past your hair.”

“Idiot. What's up?”

“Ugh.” Eren flopped over and dropped his head onto Mikasa's lap. The room rocked. “Boy stuff.”

“What, as in you're on your man-period or you're having trouble with a boy?”


“Eren.” Mikasa gave him the side-eye. “How do you even have time for shit like that when you're exorcising demons and talking to dead people?”

“I don't even know!” Eren waved his hands emphatically, growing dizzy as he watched them fly before his eyes. “I really do have better things to do with my time than worry about shit like that. Like... like...” he squinted, knowing there was something important he was meant to do. “Hey. Hey, Mikasa. Can we play Just Dance?”

Mikasa sighed and ran a hand through Eren's hair. “Do you want to play Just Dance?”

“Yesss.”

“Fine. But how about this? You dance and I tape it and send it to Jean, so he has dirt on you for the rest of your life.”

“Ha!” Eren shot up and whirled to point a finger in Mikasa's face. “Joke's on you because I am an excellent secret dancer.”

Mikasa laughed softly and shook her head. “No, hun, I'm still pretty sure the joke is always on you.”

“Psh. I'm gonna get everyone else.”

Eren dashed off and squealed to a stop in the kitchen. Annie and Hanji were washing dishes together, and it sounded like they were discussing soccer teams.

“Guys, this is so not the time for that. Come play Just Dance with us, please? Today has been a shit day, can we pretend we're normal and just have a fun night?”

“Eren,” Hanji said soberly, as she turned and dried her hands with a towel. Her face lit up. “You had me at Just Dance. Let's hit it! Come on, Annie.”

“I already hate the sound of this,” Annie said darkly, but she followed anyway, leaving half-washed plates to linger in the sink.

Despite Mikasa's insistence that she wasn't going to play, everyone in the room was in hysterics as Eren and Hanji reinacted with great enthusiasm, the entire Ghostbusters song and dance. Hanji was Slimer.

Eren panted softly at the end of the song, beaming as he already chose another song. Mikasa and Annie were in the background, snickering as they rewatched the previous dance on Mikasa's phone.
“Hanji, look, you can be a fat panda in this one,” Eren said excitedly chose a Ke$ha song.

Hanji lined up beside him and squinted at the screen. “Yeah, well you're wearing knee-socks and cat ears, buddy.”

“I'd look great in knee-socks and -”

The song began and Mikasa and Annie rapidly switched couches so they could get a front view of their dance.

When the song burst into jumping-jacks and claps, Eren and Hanji simply lost it. And, for once, Eren was not even slightly embarrassed to be singing along to one of the zillion pop songs he had memorised.

“Come on, 'cause I know what I like, and you're looking just like my type! Let's go for it just for tonight! Come on, come on, come on!”

Eren and Hanji jumped to face each other, Eren doing way too good a job at twerking at her while he sang, “Now don't even try to deny, we're both going home satisfied! Let's go for it just for tonight! Come on, come on, come on!”

Annie, for the first time ever, was actually doubled up on the couch with giggles as Eren and Hanji proceeded to butt bump. Eren knew he was smiling like an idiot, and he knew he was singing too loud, but every move he hit on target felt like an achievement, felt rewarding, felt fun. And he just wanted to forget in the company of his friends, even if for just a few songs.

The music slowed before the refrain, and Mikasa was scream-laughing, “No, no, oh my god!” as Eren and Hanji started to do a synchronised Mexican wave, followed by a series of strangely robotic movements.

Eren refused to break eye-contact with Mikasa as he sang to her with full inflection. “I don't wanna go to sleep, I wanna stay up all night, I wanna just screw around, I don't wanna think about what's gonna be after this, I wanna just live right now!”

Hanji started spinning in circles, whooping and waving her hands in the air while Eren rolled his head around in a hair-whirling headbang.

And, as the song dictated, and to the squeals of glee from everyone in the room, Eren jumped on Hanji’s back and rode it, with a, “Come ooooooooon!”

Everyone was too fucked after that bit to make it through the song with any real coherency, and the remainder of the moves were a mess of twerking and fist-pumping and clapping and twirling.

By the end of the song, Eren was gasping and made a point of simply dropping to the floor on his back. “Someone else's turn,” he called out, closing his eyes.

When he opened them and tilted his head back, he spotted an upside down Levi, who was sitting on the opposite couch that had been out of view while Eren had been dancing at the television.

Eren ignored the heavy bass of his heart. “Um. Hi?” he said with a friendly smile. “Did you like the show?”

Levi eyed Eren from head to toe, in a way that had Eren sure that his entire song and dance routine had just been witnessed. “It was... enlightening.”
Annie came over and toed Eren's side, holding a hand out for him to take. “Eren, you're actually a seriously good singer and dancer. You don't really look like you would be.”

Eren stood with the offered help and grinned. “Why, what do I look like?”

With a scrutinising look, Annie blatantly said, “A scrawny loser.”

Eren’s jaw dropped. “Why would you talk to your gay dad like this, Annie? What have I ever done to you?”

“I'm pretty sure you strangled me.”

“Well, that was obviously for your own good.”

Annie snorted a laugh, then her expression soured as she placed her hands on her hips. “Right. Who's next? I haven't yet gathered the courage to do it.”

Eren glanced at Levi and found he was still being stared at. He gulped, then turned to Mikasa and grabbed her hand. “Come on, you're not getting out of this.”

“I so hate you.”

“I so love you.”

When a French pop song came on, Eren immediately lost himself to the music. The moves in this one were slightly more difficult and he found himself smiling widely as he was forced to concentrate on the instructions.

About forty seconds of Mikasa's struggling ended with, “Fuck, this shit is too hard,” as she laughed and walked away from Eren's side.

“Nooo!” Eren yelled, his eyes still glued to the screen as he sharply executed each move.

“What the hell, Eren?” Hanji yelled. “Are you a fucking robot? Did you cheat and look all this up on YouTube ahead of time and memorise the dances?”

“This is the first time I've played the new version,” Eren said breathlessly.

“How can you be so crap at everyday life and so good at this,” Annie muttered with mock bitterness.

Eren chuckled and saw the song through. “Okay, okay,” he said, lifting the hem of his shirt to wipe his damp face. “I need water.”

“Holy shit, Eren, are those kind-of abs?” Hanji said, quite literally falling to her knees to roam her fingers across his stomach.

“This is seriously becoming sexual harassment in the workplace,” Eren said, stumbling back and away from her. “But yeah, I did used to work in a gym up until a week ago, you know?”

“I take back scrawny,” Annie said quietly, her head tilting as she openly checked him out.

“Well, now that I'm feeling somewhat sober and all sorts of violated, I'm just gonna go this way,” Eren said, jerking a thumb towards the door.

Leaving the room, Eren ran a hand through his hair, feeling it stick up in disarray. Haircut, he reminded himself for the millionth time.
About to head into the kitchen, a cool hand grabbed his wrist and twisted him around.

“Hey, wh- oh.” Eren eyed Levi suspiciously, doing his very best to ignore the blistering heat that scorched his ears at just remembering Levi’s mouth devastatingly assaulting his own. “What's up?”

“I like you,” Levi said between gritted teeth, like someone was wrenching his arm behind his back in the same moment. He didn't release Eren's wrist. Instead, the pad of his thumb traced the fluttering pulse there as he soberly met Eren's look of shock. “For some reason, I like you even more when you're being ridiculous and... And I'm not good at liking people, alright? I prefer blind dislike until further convinced.”

Eren grinned and felt a weight sink away, leaving him feeling light and dizzy. “Shit priest.”

“Ex-priest. If I was a priest, then I'd be feeling incredibly guilty right now, rather than incredibly fucking stupid.”

“I won't tell if you won't tell,” Eren said with a mock whisper.

Levi stared at him darkly. “I take it back. I like you less when you're being ridiculous.”

“No take backsies.”

“Shitty brat.”

“So what? You like me.”

“Repeat that again and I'll stab you.”

“Well, I think we're off to a great start.”
OVER 6000 HITS?! I genuinely don't know what to say, guys. I feel like at the 10,000 mark, I'm going to have to do something really special for you all. I'm just... flabbergasted. You're all so kind and genuine and FUNNY when it comes to your comments, and it brings me very simple joy to write for all of you. I'm so glad that I decided to join this fandom.

Remember, on Tumblr I track 'fic: the strange and the usual', 'lalazee', and now also 'fic: tsatu', because I know my title is too long. I'm atomicblonde on Tumblr and NEVER feel to shy to come and chat, I really like talking, whether if it's about fic or Ereri or SNK or other fandoms you might see that we have in common.

This chapter took a lot out of me, but in a good way, I suppose. I hope it resonates with you. I hope it creeps you out, even if just a little. And I hope you don't mind that I used capslock in one scene - I never do that, but the situation called for it! Enjoy!

“Her gates are the gates of death,” She said with a smile in her midnight voice.

Eren squinted into the darkness, trying to see Her. “Who is that?”

Then She wasn't in front of him, but beside him. Lips against his ear – chilled dead mouth like a drowned woman.

“And from the...” The voice faded away, circled him and whispered in his other ear, “she sets out towards Sheol.”


Eren's eyes snapped open. He stared at the ceiling, unmoving. He frowned, realising he was shivering. He was so very cold.

The bedroom was blanketed deep in shadow and Eren turned his head slowly, his neck stiff and aching. He eyed the numbers on the clock, their eerie green glow informing him it was just past five in the morning. Eren couldn't even hear the birds singing yet.

Body protesting movement, Eren sat up and pressed his icy feet to the floor. He looked down at his spread fingers and numbly notice their trembling.

Eren made a low noise of recognition and dropped his hands to his lap, staring out into the empty room. He could swear someone was staring back.

Shaking the cobwebs from his head, Eren stood and dug through a pile of clothes that had accumulated on an armchair in the corner of the room. He pulled on loose basketball shorts and a t-shirt, sneakers with no socks. Grabbing his iPod, he left his room and quietly worked his way down the hall.
He paused at Bertolt's room, cracked the door and peered in. He was still asleep, still looking well. His chest moved in deep, calm breaths.

“Keep fighting,” Eren said softly.

He wasn't sure if that was for Bertl or for himself.

The entire house was cloaked in that sacred morning silence that felt so beautiful and intimate it was almost worth waking up for. Creeping through the corridors, Eren made it to the gym and flicked the lights on, wincing when he eyes refused to adjust quick enough.

For a split second, as he was blinking into the brightness, Eren swore he saw a shadow behind him in the wall mirror. When he whirled and found nothing, Eren repressed the shiver that tracked sharply down his spine, popped his earbuds in, and blasted himself with Beyonce.

Eren ran. His feet pounded the spinning belt as fast as he could, on an incline so extreme he was almost surprised he didn't go flying off. Once again, Eren let his mind float away, distanced himself from his body, let go. He'd long stopped tracking how long or hard he worked out.

After his legs were jelly, he stumbled off the treadmill and aimed for the weights. He didn't look at himself in the mirror like some people did at the gym. He'd never seen the point. He knew what he looked like. Sweaty and in disarray.

Swiping off his shirt and tossing it aside, Eren went to the floor for some long, languid cool-down stretches. He had his legs spread in as close to the splits as he ever could, and was leaning to the side until his forehead touched his knee. He felt more human now – much less robotic and strangely mechanical, like when he'd first awoken.

Shifting to move to his other leg, Eren gasped and flung a hand to his chest when he saw Levi standing in the doorway. His eyes were dark-rimmed, hair slightly mussed, and wearing another one of his obscure band t-shirts and dark green flannel pyjama pants.

Eren pulled out his earbuds and let them tangle on his chest. “Hey,” he said, his voice raspy from disuse. “What's up?”

“I thought I heard someone in here. I was just checking. You're never up this early, Sleeping Beauty.”

Eren rolled his eyes. “Of all the nicknames Jean had to coin.” He brought his forehead to his other knee and held the stretch.

“IT suits.”

Eren snorted derisively. “Uh huh. You think I'm beautiful?”

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Eren brought his head up and sat with his legs folded yoga-style. Bringing his hands above his head and lacing his fingers, he arched his back and sighed as he felt his body finally realign.

“You doing that on purpose?” Levi said gruffly.

Eren aimed a quizzical frown in the mirror and dropped his hands. “Doing what?”
Levi heaved a put upon sigh and leaned against the doorway with his arms crossed. “How did you make it to twenty-two without any sense of self-awareness?”

“I have self-awareness,” Eren said with a pout as he got to his feet. “I'm aware thaaat...” his voice went playful as he made for Levi with an impish grin. “I wanna kiss you.”

“Hell no,” Levi said flatly, putting up a hand in front of Eren's bare, sweaty chest, but not touching. “You're disgusting. And you smell.”

“Is that all?”

“And you can't be all over me like some overenthusiastic pet. People will notice, and I'm not exactly up for sharing with the world whatever fucked up thing this is.”

Deciding to ignore the painful little pang in his chest at their relationship being considered fucked up, Eren narrowed his eyes and leaned into Levi's space. “Overenthusiastic pet, huh?”

Levi met Eren's gaze and raised an eyebrow. “Yeah.”

“Why don't we find out how much self-awareness I really have, huh, Levi?” Eren reached forward and hooked his thumbs in the soft waistband of Levi's pyjamas. His nail lightly scraped at the sharp jut of hipbone, and Levi's eyes darkened, his lips slightly parting. Eren brought his voice down an octave, a world away from his usual bright chatter. “You consider my liking you to be all over you? Let's see how much it takes for you to end up all over me and we'll find out who's the pet, here.”

Eren snapped Levi's waistband and smiled wickedly. “Okay? I'm gonna go shower now. Wouldn't wanna be too disgusting for the day.”

Feeling miles better than he had a few hours ago, Eren swept past a struck mute Levi and headed for the stairs, whistling I'm A Survivor.

Eren had showered and dressed, for once taking some time to choose his clothing. He picked his most thin, fitted t-shirt that displayed the width of his shoulders, and a pair of tighter jeans than made his ass look pretty incredible, if he had to judge.

By the time he came downstairs, people were roaming through the kitchen for coffee and cereal and taking their places at the table. Levi, dressed immaculately as ever, was already hiding behind his newspaper, Father Erwin was nowhere to be found, and Mikasa looked half asleep behind her thick curtain of hair.

Eren chose nothing but a cup of coffee and slid into the seat next to Annie. She had a book open and was reading while distractedly chomping on some buttered toast. “Studying?”

Annie grunted in assent.

“You know if you ever have a test that you want help with, I can quiz you and stuff.”

Annie looked up and blinked at him, coming out of her reading haze. “What, really? Could you do that now? Because I have these notecards...”

Flopping her backpack on the table, Annie pulled out the prepared cards. The next half-hour was spent with Eren quizzing her for a biology test. It felt a little disorienting to do something so normal, but at the same time it was just another way Eren felt at home in this unexpected, kind of crazy household.
Eventually, Annie had to head to school and Mikasa disappeared with her laptop to read her assignments. Eren was on his second cup of coffee and messing around with the crossword puzzle from the newspaper, when the sound of the front door opening and closing echoed through the house. Frowning, Eren looked to Levi in question.

“Bertolt's nurse,” Levi said, without looking up from the paper. “She has a key. Her name's Petra. She knows what we do here.”

“Ah.” Eren looked back down to his crossword, then back up to Levi. “Oh. Hey, Levi?”

“What?”

“What's Sheol? Or, where? I don't even know.”

Levi peered up from the newspaper, his brow furrowed. “Sheol?”

“Uh huh.”

“It’s... the Hewbrew equivalent of the underworld. Home of the dead. Why?”

“Just... I heard it somewhere.”

Levi folded his paper neatly and set it on the table, his attention fixed on Eren's face. Slowly, he said, “You're saying between last night and now, you somehow came across the word and it meant enough to you that you asked me about it?”

“Okay, well, I didn't like hear it casually in conversation or anything,” Eren said, rubbing his arm anxiously. He licked his lips, and looked down, staring at the wood-grain in the table. “Someone said it to me in a dream.”

Levi tilted his head, considering. “Who?”

“I don't know. But she said this thing. I don't remember much of it at all, anymore.” Eren frowned, thinking hard. “I just remember something about going to Sheol, and I wondered what it was.”

“You're telling me that while you sleep, someone is whispering in your ear about going to hell,” Levi said darkly, but it was obvious to Eren that the simmer he saw in Levi's eyes wasn't directed at him.

“I dunno, I guess? I woke up feeling like someone was in the room with me. But that's not really unusual anymore, to be honest. I suppose it could have been anything. It just felt weird.”

Levi huffed a breath and folded his hands on the table, leaning forward as he held Eren's gaze. “Let me know if anything else like that comes up.”

Eren nodded quietly, then scrunched his face up as he remembered. “Levi?”

“What?”

“Do you have that, um, tape player?” Eren's voice went soft. He didn't want anyone hearing them and asking questions.

Levi nodded briefly. “Of course. You seemed like you wanted to forget about it for a while and I didn't want to force you until you wanted to go through with it.”

“That...” Eren gaped at him for a moment, then beamed. “That's like the most thoughtful thing you've ever said to me.”
“It's purely selfish, I assure you. I don't want anyone in this house having a fucking nervous breakdown. It'd be up to me to have to clean your pitiful, crying mess.”

Eren snorted. “You're the embodiment of kindness.”

Levi just rolled his eyes. “So, when do you want to do it?”

“The...”

“Tape. Fucking freak.”

“Right. The tape. Yeah, uh, ASAP? Do you have anything going?”

“Not right now. This afternoon I have some phone calls to make regarding Jean's discharge paperwork, and Bertolt's admission. Nothing that can't wait until later in the day.”

Eren realised that his hands had been sweating this entire conversation. His heart was jackrabbiting in his chest. He swallowed hard. “Okay. So, uh, your room? Safest place?”

“Probably. No one is going to barge in there unless it's important or they want to lose an appendage.”

Eren just nodded and stood to take his mug into the kitchen. He was about to pass Levi when a hand reached out and touched his hip. Eren looked down in confusion.

Levi was glaring. “You didn't eat.”

Eren scrunched his nose. “Not hungry.”

“Do you want me to force fucking feed you, Jaeger?”

“Is that an offer for you to physically like, feed me food, because I would love that.”

Levi's eyes widened briefly, before he narrowed them. “Go choke down an actual banana and meet me in my room.” He shot up from his seat and stalked away, muttering, “Fucking brat,” under his breath.

“He's too easy,” Eren said to himself cheerfully. But his mouth dropped to a deep frown the second he remembered the tape.

He wasn't looking forward to this. At first, he'd been desperate to get his hands on something that would reveal the circumstances of his mother's past. Now, he felt ill just thinking about it.

Eren wondered if he was just getting himself too worked out over this. The tape might come to nothing.

But Eren had a feeling it wouldn't, and he'd recently begun to trust in his feelings.

Just like Eren was trusting his feelings in regards to Levi. He didn't know why he was so strongly pursuing this relationship, but it was something that would take a lot of effort and energy to ignore. So, Eren couldn't see why he should put all that work into repressing something when he could just accept it and go with it. Eren had spent many years fighting the current and there was literally nothing he had gotten out of it except for a shitload of useless pride. Eren knew he could still be too intense about things that mattered to him, but he at least tried to go with the flow a little bit more than he'd used to.

Eren sighed to himself as he cleared up the table and washed the sparse dishes. He supposed trying
to seduce Levi would just have to wait for another day. Eren was in no rush, and today was for more important things.

Popping upstairs while eating a banana, Eren retrieved the tape and shoved it in his back pocket. He stopped again at Bertolt's room and looked in.

There was a woman in a white summer dress sitting beside his bed. She looked so ethereal that for a moment Eren thought she was another spirit. But then he recalled the name Petra. Bertl's nurse.

“I feel like white is not a good colour to wear when you're a nurse,” Eren said, offering a little wave when Petra looked up with bewilderment. “I mean, the blood and... other gunk.”

“Other gunk doesn't bother me,” Petra said easily, her lips curving. “Blood neither.”

“I guess it wouldn't. Hey, I'm Eren. You're Petra, right?”

“I am. It's nice to meet you, Eren. Although, we've met before. I came with Hanji to check you out when you'd first been admitted to the house. I'm glad you're healthy now, though.”

“Oh. Well, thanks for the hard work in helping me not die.”

Petra breathed a soft laugh and placed her hand over Bertolt's. “I'm sure that was mostly down to you.”

“Maybe.” Eren leaned a hip against the doorjam. He nodded towards Bertl. “How is he?”

“He's a big, sturdy guy. He'll make it through. Physically, at least. Emotionally – one never knows.”

“We'll take care of him,” Eren said with a smile. “Everyone did that for me, anyway.”

Petra returned the smile. “Sounds like a good plan.”

“I'll see you later, then?”

“Most likely. Bye, Eren.”

Eren dashed down the stairs, his mind switching inward, his expression growing reticent as he reached Levi's room and knocked.

Levi answered and simply said, “Ready?”

“As I'll ever be. Whatcha got there?” Eren asked, gesturing to the bed where a laptop sat.

“I'm going to record it while it plays, so we have a safer copy. One that I can also clean up, so we can hear if we've missed something. I'm tempted to confiscate the rest of the tapes from your father as well and do the same. Like I'd said, they're not his to keep.”

“Yeah. We'll see how happy he is about that,” Eren said with a short, humourless laugh.

“I don't give a shit about his happiness.” Levi said it so icily that Eren could only assume he wasn't just thinking about how Dad had hidden away the tapes.

Wordlessly, Eren moved to the bed and sat on it, criss-crossing his legs. Levi stripped his suit jacket and placed it on the back of an armchair, running a hand along the arm to release any creases. He crisply rolled up each sleeve three times, his face a tranquil profile, his shiny black hair just curtaining his eyes and expression.
When he looked up and found Eren studying him, Levi immediately reverted to a face that made him look like a thug with a baseball bat hidden behind his back. Eren wondered how he did that so well. Levi cocked his head, one lip curling, “What're you lookin' at?”

“I was thinking that you have really nice hands.”

Levi flicked a brow. “Okay, then.”

“You're just crap with emotions, aren't you?” Eren said, chuckling.

“Says you. Yours are at full volume, one-hundred percent of the time. Put a fucking muzzle on it, kid.”

Eren frowned down at his hands and wondered if he was actually that bad or if it was Levi being overly dramatic.

“Oh, for Christ's sake.” Opposite Eren, Levi brought one knee onto the bed and bowed forward until both palms were spread across the duvet. Canting his chin, Levi captured Eren's mouth in a warm, solid kiss that both soothed and enticed him. When their lips broke, Levi's subtle sigh was nearly lost under the weight of their breath.

“Don't sulk,” Levi said sternly, then shifted to sit on the edge of the bed, hiking his slacks up comfortably over his thighs.

Eren knew he was staring dreamily at Levi as he tapped out some commands on the laptop. He knew it, but he wasn't sure he had it in him to care.

Levi made him forget to be anything but entirely himself.

“Tape,” Levi said, holding out a hand as his other clicked open the tape player that sat beside the computer.

Eren fished it out from his back pocket and dropped it in Levi's wide, pale palm. Levi's hands were not what Eren expected – they weren't nearly as slender as the man himself. They were masculine, capable, with scars on the knuckles. Eren wondered if they spoke more of the guy before the priest than did the rest of Levi's look.

Watching Levi press record on the laptop and the play button on the tape, Eren quietly said, “Geronimo,” and waited.

“May twenty-fourth, nineteen ninety-two.” It was Father Erwin's voice. Had he known that Dad kept all of the tapes? Were their copies? Had Father Erwin wanted Eren to discover this tape? If so, why not just tell him straight away? The recording had barely begun and Eren was already reeling.

“It has been a day since our second attempt at exorcising the demon from Carla Jaeger. The entity refuses to share it's name, but I believe it to be a part of the hierarchy. It's strong. Stronger than most. As for Carla... She is weakening, but this is all we can do. Few people in history have survived a third attempt. Dr. Jaeger, who is currently present, is aware of the circumstances and dangers, but insists on continuing forth. His faith remains in me, and in God.”

Eren had felt the blood drain from his face, his heart slamming against the rattling cage of his ribs. He swayed a little on the bed, staring blankly at the tape player. His father had fucking known he was endangering her life. He'd practically had a hand in murdering her, himself. A tentative voice of reason, of years of experience, shyly informed him that there had been no other path, and Eren mentally slammed it to the ground, splattering it beneath his heel.
“Now, we will begin the third exorcism of Carla Jaeger.”

There were footsteps, as if Father Erwin and Dad were walking slowly down the hallway. The hollow click of the door, and immediately heavy, constricted breathing. Like something was trying to climb out of someone's throat.

“Hello, darlings,” Eren's mother said in a voice like a jarring duet of two women.

Eren's lips parted in mute horror, tears springing up and stinging his eyes before he had any control over it. This was the first time he'd heard his mama's voice in ten years. He'd forgotten what she'd sounded like; and yet, at the same time, her voice hit him in the gut like a sledgehammer. The wind was knocked out of him, Eren's lungs crying for him to take a breath.

Father Erwin began his prayers, the holy words pelting Eren like hard rain. He winced at the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. His mother – the thing inside his mother, merely cackled, a voice like rattling bones.

“My son, my son. Where is my beloved son, Grisssssha?”

Looking down at the bedspread, Eren distantly wondered if the ceiling had a leak. Then he realised he was staining the neat, pristine duvet with a flow of tears that would not cease.

“He's not your son,” Eren's father said, his voice sounding younger, less grizzled with turmoil and sleepless nights.

“Ohhh, he will be.”

Father Erwin's prayers increased in urgency and velocity, like bullets that sliced through the sudden shrill screams of Eren's mother – the demon – no, Eren's mother. It was her throat that tore with pain. It would have been her lungs burning in those final moments.

“Demon, tell me your name!”

“Ki-sikil-lil-la-ke!”

“By the order of God and his Angels, give me a name!”

“Ki-sikil-lil-la-ke!” Eren could hear thrashing on the bed, the guttural growls and grunts of the demon struggling for escape as it hissed in tongues unknown.

“This servant of God demands a name!”

“Lilituuu!” the demon shrieked, the sound of the headboard cracking against the wall striking with splitting pain against Eren's temples.

“Lilitu?” Father Erwin said breathlessly.

The demon was keening quietly in the background, her voice adrift, like waves raging in and out. Eren couldn't tell what she was chanting, but it was the same words ad naseum.

Again, Father Erwin said, “Lilitu? Lilith?”

“Her gates are the gates of death.”

“Lilith?”
“And from the entrance of the house, she sets of towards Sheol.”

In tandem, Eren and Levi sharply looked to each other. Alarm bells blared in Eren's skull like fists pounding from the inside out, roaring for release.

“Silence,” Father Erwin bellowed.

Lilith's voice crescendoed, filled the room with black, poisonous hate. “None of those who enter there will ever return!”

“You will be torn from this body, Lilith, and -”

“And all who possess her will descend to the Pit!” The creature burst into laughter, a chorus of devils overlapping her voice, crushing Eren under the weight of their charred, blackened joy.

There was a creak, like the sound of a door opening.

A gasp filled the room – it sounded like a little girl. Another sharp intake of breath followed – Eren's father.

“Mom?”

Oh god, it was Eren. It wasn't a girl at all.


“Eren, why are you home? Jesus, get out!”

“J-just I-I had to come home early 'cause I wasn't f-feeeling good and I... and I had a bad f-feeling.” The fear dripped from Eren's voice, his words shaking like he couldn't stop his entire body from shuddering in shock. “Daddy? That's – that's not Mom. That's not Mom. Oh god, oh god, oh god, there's something on her! There's something on her! Why aren't you helpi – let go of me!”

“Get him out of here, Grisha!” Father Erwin said, voice resounding from that tape player as if he were in the room.

“I'm tryi – ouch! Shit, Eren! Erwin, he f-fucking bit me, I'm f-fucking bleeding! Eren, get away from her, get -”

“GET OFF OF MY MOM!” The decibel at which young Eren was screaming grated at Eren's ears. He couldn't look at Levi, couldn't look away from the tape. Horror ripped him to shreds, left him burning in a thousand places as he listened to him futilely attempting to save the most important person in his life.

The demon sounded as if she were laughing and screaming at the same time. Her howling was like a windstorm, and Eren was in the centre of it all.

“I'LL RIP YOUR FUCKING THROAT OUT.”

“He's choking her – get him off her!”

“GET OFF, GET OFF, GET – OFF!”

Eren and his mother – now it was his mother's voice, alone, so alone – shrieked in tandem. Grisha and Erwin were yelling, the sound of their feet deafening as they ran to do whatever-the-hell they were doing in there. The noise was overwhelming, painful, and Eren hadn't realised his slapped his
palms over his ears until he realised the room had dimmed around him.

When he dropped his hands, he heard nothing but the sound of his younger self sobbing. Then the crying stopped.

“Shit,” his father said. “He's out.” His voice cracked. “Shit. He ripped it out of her, Erwin. Did you see that? He took it out.”

“Grisha,” Father Erwin said. “She's gone.”

“What? No.”

“Carla's gone.”


Father Erwin's voice interrupted with what sounded like the Last Rites. “Per istam sanctan unctionem et suam piissimam misericordiam, indulgeat tibi Dominus quidquid per -”

“No no no, what did he do to you? What did he do?”

“-visum, audiotum, odorátum, gustum et locutiónem, tactum, gressum deliquisti.”

Then there was only the heartbroken sound of his father's mourning.

Levi stopped the tape and tapped a few keys on his laptop.

As if the tape halting had the same affect on Eren, he careened forward on his knees, face shoved into the bedspread as vicious sobs wracked his frame. Hands fisted in the sheets, Eren screamed into the blanket, the muffled sound bouncing back at him, mocking him.

A soft, sure hand was at his back, rubbing in slow circles. Eren curled into himself further, unsure if he wanted to be touched or just left to wither away. Years of expounded rage, confusion, and sorrow all unfolded at once, burst apart at the seams and torn him apart.

Eren lost track of time in which the wrenching cries battered his body into numb submission, demolished him to an empty shell that laid on the bed like dead weight.

Rubbing at his aching eyes, Eren realised that his head was pillowed on Levi's lap, and that long, warm fingers were rhythmically carding through his hair. Eren blinked blearily and turned his head, just enough to look up at Levi.

Their gazes entwined in the desolate silence after the storm, and for the first time, Eren felt like he'd just seen Levi. For real. Because there was no pity there, no annoyance – not even anger. The Levi who was looked down at him, calmly petting his hair and smoothing his fingertips across Eren's brow, was a man with deep mourning in his eyes, and a deeper understanding of where true sadness came from.

“I did it,” Eren said in a cracked voice like an empty husk. “I was the one who killed her. Doing – doing what I'm doing to people now. This isn't new. It's always been there. I've always been here. I ruined my own life.”

“You had no idea,” Levi said in a low, soothing purr that Eren had no idea he possessed. “You were a child. How would you have known?”
“Doesn’t change the fact that I killed her,” Eren said hollowly. “All this time hating other people. Should have been hating myself.”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Jaeger.” That flinty look had returned, although Levi’s hand remained gentle on Eren’s scalp. “Don’t throw your life out the window because of the past. Use it to learn. Use it to be a better version of yourself. Drag enough past around with you and you’ll eventually be buried. You need to let go.”

“I don’t – I don’t think I can.”

Levi’s palm paused on Eren’s forehead. Their eyes met for a moment, then Levi looked away and sighed. “Stay here,” he said.

“As if I’d go anywhere.”

Levi nodded briefly and carefully slipped out from under Eren’s head. He brushed his slacks off, although the teary splotches remained on his thighs. Levi walked out the door, leaving Eren to numbly stare at the stripes of the bedspread.

*Lilith.* Her words had echoed in his mind, like something he’d heard before.

*Her gates are the gates of death.*

Levi came back with a steaming mug in his hand. “Sit up,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Eren lurched up, sniffling wetly as he wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands. When he dropped them, Levi was already holding out the cup to him.

“What’s that?” Eren asked suspiciously, but accepted it and took a hesitant sip. He winced.

“What? Whiskey?”

“And tea. But mostly whiskey.”

Eren coughed a weak laugh. “I’ll take it.”

They sat in silence for a while. Levi watched Eren like one of those clever Tomcats you see wandering the alleys. The kind that you wanted to pet, but you knew they’d tear up your hand if you tried. And yet, they still followed you home.

Levi shut his laptop and put it and the tape player to the bedside table. “I want to show you something,” he said quietly, looking away, staring at the wallpaper as if he didn’t want to meet Eren’s eyes.

“Eh? Sure.”

“It requires a trip.”

“What – when?”

“Now, preferably.”

“Why?”

“Do you have to ask so many fucking – ugh. Because I wanna go before I lose my nerve.”
Well, that had the gears turning in Eren's head. He boggled at Levi. “Okay. I mean, yeah. I'll pack a bag.”

“No. You drink this. I'll pack. If you trust me with your things.”

“Levi.” Eren reached out and, for the first time, linked his fingers with Levi's. Levi was looking down at their hands with what looked like emotions ranging from affronted to affectionate. “I trust you. Idiot.”

Levi snapped his gaze up, but only nodded. “Fine. You finish that. I'll get your things. Just...try not do anything stupid in the five minutes that I'm gone.”

Eren managed a meagre smile. “Aye, sir.”

Rolling his eyes, Levi gave Eren's hand one solid squeeze and then let go. He muttered, “Smartass,” on his way out the door.

Eren stared at his palm, relishing the lingering warmth that Levi left with him. For the first time in a long time, Eren was alone, but he didn't feel lonely.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Because I traumatised you to high-hell with the last chapter, here’s a winding down chapter! So, I'm sure you can guess that the mood of the chapter after this will, again, take a turn for the worst haha. I'm so damn predictable.

I know this is extremely dialogue-heavy and I apologise for nothing. What the hell else you gonna do on a road trip?!

“Didn't you say you had shit to do today?” Eren said as he mechanically got into Levi’s snazzy car and buckled his seatbelt. The environment still felt surreal, detached – like he was watching himself function from the dreary rafters.

“Even on your bad days you don't shut up,” Levi said conversationally as he turned over the engine. “I texted Erwin, gave him my work. He'll take it and deal with it.”

“Can't you, like... get fired for throwing your responsibilities around?”

“I already technically quit. All of this is really just a bonus for them.”

Eren had to wonder if Levi actually wanted to leave. Maybe he was just making a show of it, when all he wanted was someone to convince him to come back. Eren knew everyone did that once in a while.

“Do you like your job?”

Levi was silent, thinking as he passed a car, got a honk in return, and brought his hand up to flick them off as he zoomed away. “Some parts. But I didn't join the priesthood or pursue exorcisms because I thought I'd enjoy it.”

“Don't most people try to follow a profession they enjoy?”

“Let me ask you this, Jaeger. If you do, by some miracle, manage to become an exorcist, do you seriously think you'll jump out of bed every morning and think: Oh, wow, yay! Can't wait to see another person in excruciating physical and emotional anguish! I'm so happy I get to make them feel all better or, hey, maybe kill them by accident, IDK.”

“Did you just say IDK?”

"Enjoying this job doesn't come with this job, Eren.”

“Because, although I hope you can tell I don't mind an age gap, you're way too old to say IDK.”

“I was paraphrasing to remain on your level of intelligence.”

“Dude, I have never said IDK.”

“Positive I've heard you say BRB to Jean.”
“Oh em gee, that was like one time!” Eren said playfully, earning a twitch of lips from Levi.

Companionable silence threaded between them, linked them together in equal comfort of each other's presence. Still, Eren's mind was ever drifting towards the macabre. His mother's screams echoed in the winding halls of his mind, never again free, never finding their way out of his head.

“So, why did you quit?”

Levi's fingers visibly tightened on the steering wheel. “First, let me show you why I started.”

Eren openly inspected Levi's calm profile. He didn't recognise tension or anxiety in his expression, but Levi's shoulders were bunched beneath his dove grey jacket.

“Why do you trust me with this?” Eren said, straight-up. He couldn't fathom he had much to lose in asking. “I can't imagine it's just because you're attracted to me or whatever. You're not stupid like that.”

“Your comment implies I'm stupid in other areas,” Levi said tersely.

“Well, you could use some therapy in dealing with your emotions in a healthy way.”

Levi shot daggers at him ans he jerkily shifted gears and increased speed. “Who died and made you a goddamn psychiatrist?”

“Well, I did see one for a long-ass time. I'm just saying.” Eren shrugged and picked at a tiny hole in the knee of his jeans. That was a shame. These were his best pair. “How many trusted friends do you have?”

Levi was silent.

Eren looked at him. “What, Erwin and Hanji? Maybe me, if you'd let me -”

“Tsch. And how many do you have?”

Eren thought of Mikasa. They undoubtedly had a connection – had potential – but Eren didn't want to push it. He didn't want to get his hopes up. And, well, Armin was literally dead.

“None. Which is how I know how important they are.”

“Since when did this trip turn into a lecture from a fucking twelve year-old?” Levi said irritably.

Eren shifted in his seat and slanted towards Levi. With his mouth brushing the warm curve of Levi's ear, Eren sharply whispered, “Not – a – kid,” and punctuated the declaration by sliding his hand up Levi's firm thigh, fingertips brushing between his legs. Eren bit down on Levi's ear, his teeth scraping over the lobe and away.

With a triumphant little smirk, Eren watched as, for the first time, Levi went pink from neck to ears. His knuckles were bone white on the wheel.

“Oh, that's a good spot, huh? I'll keep it in mind.”

“If I wasn't driving right now I would fucking destroy you, Jaeger,” Levi said tightly, his eyes trained on the road.

“Destroy me like make sure I can't walk straight for a week or -”
“Destroy as in you'll never walk the same again.”

After careful consideration for his well-being, Eren removed his hand from Levi's thigh and returned fully to his seat. “Told you. Issues dealing with emotions.”

“No. Issues dealing with a stupid brat sexually harassing me while I'm driving.”

“Psh, you let it happen.”

To that, Levi remained stoically silent as he merged onto the highway.

Eren didn't want the quiet. He didn't want to dwell on what happened. He wanted to wrap himself in Levi, blanket himself in the present and cover his head until the past felt like nothing but a distant nightmare that he could barely recall.

“So,” Eren said, after what he considered an appropriate amount of peace. “You didn't answer my question. Why do you trust me?”

“You just...” Levi said, his tone strangely young. “You remind me of someone I know.”

Eren perked up at that. “Really? Who?”

“That's where I'm taking you.”

“Really?” Eren kind of felt excited now. “Although that's still kind of an evasive answer.”

“Look, Jaeger. If you're hunting for that person who's gonna moon over you and recite fucking sonnets about how the sun shines out your ass, then you're in the wrong car.”

“No,” Eren said with a frown. “I like who you are.”

Levi mimicked Eren's down-turned mouth and sped up, way past the limit, even for the highway. “And who is it you think I am?”

“You're a person who brings out honesty in others. Like, you don't give them any other choice. You don't take any bullshit. And I've always felt like you don't meet a lot of people who are like mirrors, you know?”

“Mirrors,” Levi said flatly, clearly perplexed as he slid a quick look Eren's way. “People who show you who you really are, whether you want them to or not.” Eren laughed nervously, running a hand through his mop of hair. He was soon going to need a rubber band to bunch up the worst of it atop his head in a stubby ponytail. “Sorry. That probably didn't make any sense.”

“No,” Levi said quickly. He drummed his fingertips on the wheel. “That is, I know what you mean. I... recently met someone who's similar. Although, instead, he brings out the best in people. He exposes the positive parts of them and forces them to try and be better than they are. It's actually a pretty douche move, if you ask me. A person starts having higher expectations of themselves after hanging out with this particular guy. Seriously ruins shit if they don't actually want to be all that good of a person.”

Eren didn't know if he could speak. He certainly knew that even if he could find his voice, his brain was short circuiting with spectacular speed. Forming entire sentences could go fuck themselves. He didn't dare move, either, unless he wanted to break out into the most uncool victory dance in the
history of ever.

So, for once, Eren kept his mouth shut and flicked on the radio. He held his tongue until the murmur of music and the hum of the engine lulled him to sleep. And, for once, Eren slept peacefully.

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When Eren stirred and lifted his cheek from the greasy mark he'd left on the window, the sun was low in the sky.

“What the -” He grumbled, rubbing the crud from his eyes. “What time is it? How long we been driving?”

“You've been out for three hours or so. We're in the next state over.”

“What, Michigan - seriously? Where the hell are we going?”

Levi sighed. “We're half way there or so. We'll stop somewhere for the night.”

“You're the boss.”

“But first, we eat. Specifically, you. What's with this whole starving yourself bullshit? You look fine the way you are.”

Eren sputtered a laugh and eyed up Levi with humour. “Uh, I'm not like doing it on purpose or anything. I don't have any real thoughts on my looks one way or the other.”

“Yeah, that's pretty obvious.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You look homeless half the time.”

“Well, apparently homeless is your type, so -” Eren stuck his tongue out at Levi. “Mleh.”

“Immature little shit.”

“You're not helping your case any.”

“Y'know, you could just gracefully accept that I'm only interested in your body and just move on from ever speaking of it again.”

Eren burst into laughter, keeling forward to rest his forehead on the dashboard. “Oh my god. Oh my god. You are so fucking emotionally constipated. I just – it's adora-”

“Finish that sentence and you will know what it feels like to be thrown out of a moving vehicle.”

“Okay, okay, jeez.” Eren bit back a smile, but the humour was evident in his tone. “What about the other half?”

“What the fuck are you talking about, dickhead?”

“You said I look homeless half of the time. What do I look like the other half?”

Levi tilted his head, aiming a sidelong glance Eren's way. His eyes were molten grey, edging on black. “Sinful.”
Eren opened his mouth to reply, and found that nothing came. He felt his face sizzle as he stared straight ahead and simply said, “Hm.”

They weren't on the highway much longer, before Levi veered off into a small-looking nowhere town. Soon after, they pulled into the gravel pseudo parking lot of a tiny diner, whose sign announced that the had the best chocolate chip pancakes in the state.

Eren groaned as they exited the car, his muscles protesting from disuse. He cracked his head from side to side and rolled his shoulders as he walked with Levi.

“I'm starving,” Eren said as they entered the diner and were assaulted by loud chatter and enticing smells of greasy food.

“Of course you fucking are. Do you even remember the last time you had a full meal?”

“Uh. Tacos?”

Eren was saved from some scathing remark when a perky waitress came over and seated them. As they looked over their menus, Levi darkly said, “You better eat at least half your weight in food, or until you're gonna puke if you eat any more.”

“You are so fucking romantic, Levi,” Eren said from behind the menu, not looking up. “I'm already half hard.”

“Shut up,” Levi muttered, kicking Eren's shin under the table.

“I'm pretty sure footsie isn't supposed to involve pain.”

“Just figure out what you wanna eat and stop talking.”

Eren bit back a smile and perused the menu in silence. Despite his seemingly cheerful demeanour – and it wasn't exactly fake, but did take some effort – Eren was in awe of how easy it was to let go around Levi and enjoy himself. He was shocked that Levi was the first person who so easily distracted him from the shadows lurking around him. And Eren was in no question over whether or not this entire trip was in order to distract him and get him out of his head. Thing was, even though Eren knew that was this outing's purpose, it was still working.

Eren made a point of ordering a stack of chocolate chip pancakes with a side of bacon, sausage, hashbrowns, and a jug of orange juice – because breakfast for every meal was the best.

“Happy now?” Eren said.

Levi just gave him one of his thug stares that told him to stop asking so many questions.

“Hey, Levi?”

“Those words genuinely fill me with dread. What.”

“Thanks for doing all of this. I needed it.”

Levi met Eren's eyes briefly, then looked to his water glass as he busied himself with wiping the rim with his napkin. “Sure.”

“We're friends, right?”

“If that's what you want to call it.”
“Well, what do you want to call it?”

“Labels are boring and pointless.”

Eren wanted to argue it, but he actually found that he agreed. “Have it your way.”

“I do.”

It didn’t take long for their food to arrive, and Eren dug in with the enthusiasm of a dying man. When they’d both finished, and Levi was evidently satisfied with the amount Eren had eaten, they split the bill and headed out.

The sun was beginning to set, and the air felt bright and refreshing against Eren's cheeks. He shoved his hands in his pockets and dragged his heels towards the car, not yet wanting to get in.

Levi's shoulder brushed his arm as they walked along, and Eren was sure that, since was was Levi and all, the motion wasn't by accident.

Eren did wonder what Levi saw in him. Like he'd mentioned to Levi in the car, physical attraction was understandable. Eren wasn't a virgin, and it wasn't foreign to him that someone might like the way he looked. Reiner had straight-up hit on him and Eren had been able to take that in stride – although that particular reaction had taken years to master.

But Eren had never actually had a boyfriend. It seemed like no one could ever stand him for any length of time. Sometimes it was down to his knack for shutting people out with a snap of fingers and then hibernating in his house for a week without contacting anyone. Sometimes it was his outspoken nature – saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, being too passionate about his opinions, or coming off self-righteous when he was particularly riled.

Whatever it was, Eren just wasn't a keeper.

But here was Levi.

Eren reminded himself that it was extremely early days and he shouldn't jump the gun. The thing was this, though – despite Levi's obvious annoyance at certain bits of Eren's nature, it didn't seem to actually repel him. And Levi had even outright admitted that he liked Eren, not just had the hots for him. The entire situation was extremely perplexing for him.

“Eren?”

Blinking out of his reverie, Eren found himself standing in front of Levi, just quietly studying him.

Levi leaned back against the hood of the car and cocked his head, seemingly unaffected by the impromptu scrutiny. “You do that a lot.”

“What?”

“Go some place else.”

“I was just thinking,” Eren said, his voice strangely soft, even to his own ears.

“How novel.”

“Hardy-har, dickbag. I was just thinking that...” Eren quietly invaded Levi's space, dropping either palm atop the hood, one hand on either side of Levi's hips. “That I don't understand you at all.”

The energy fizzing and bubbling up between them giving Eren some strange high, a buzz.

“I thought I was so all over the place that I needed a muzzle,” Eren said, mouth curving as he bumped his hips playfully against Levi's.

Levi frowned. “Maybe I just don't trust what I see.”

“Well, get used to all this,” Eren said, dramatically gesturing to his face and body with a self-deprecating half-smile. “Because what you see is what you get, unfortunately.”

Turning away, Eren had fingers curled under the door handle, when his other hand was yanked. Thrown off balance, Eren whirled and tripped right into Levi's hold. One hand gripped Eren's shoulder to pull him forward, the other alighting at his jaw, keeping Eren in place as Levi's mouth descended roughly against his own.

Eren's eyes remained wide in surprise, but when Levi's thumb brushed down and pushed on Eren's chin, coaxing his mouth open so Levi's tongue could dive in and conquer, Eren's lashes fluttered closed with a throaty moan. Levi's breath hitched in reply to Eren's noise, and the small sound of weakness, of sensitive humanity, had Eren jumping overboard. He plunged his hands into Levi's silky hair and hunched in, curving around Levi as if shielding him from the world as he drowned in that skilled, aggressive mouth.

With the small of his back bumping against the car door, Eren rolled his hips forward, already feeling the hot, straining ache jutting against the fly of his jeans. Levi's hold on Eren's shoulder tightened, maybe bruising, marking him. A thrill skated down Eren's spine as he murmured nonsense against Levi's lips, his brain scrambling for sanity as their damp mouths waged war with grazes of teeth and tongue.

A truck blared it's horn loudly as it raced by them, and Eren snapped out of it, jerking back just enough to share panting breaths in the same space as Levi.

Eren's gaze raced over Levi's features; memorised the delicate colour staining his high cheekbones. The way the bow of his top lip looked more pronounced and swollen after Eren had nibbled and nipped at it. The faint freckles that sprinkled the bridge of his sharp nose. The dark, lowered eyebrows of someone always perturbed, always thinking hard, even when Eren's own thoughts were a volatile tornado.

“What the hell was that for?” Eren gritted out.

“Don't call yourself unfortunate,” Levi said shortly, his words husky and deep. “Pisses me off.”

“Huh. I should piss you off more often.”

Levi raised his eyebrows. “Get in the fucking car, Jeager.” He released Eren from his hold and walked around the hood.

“Hey, you're the one who stopped me in the first place. Dirty priest.”

Levi met Eren's eyes over the top of the car. “You have no idea.”

Eren gawked and dropped dead silent. He remained embarrassingly quiet for the next hour. Levi had a great technique for shutting him the hell up.
“Levi.”

“What.”

“Are we heading towards Detroit?”

“Congrats, brat, you can read a fucking road sign.”

“Is that where you're from?”

“And he gets two right in a row. A prize for you.”

“What's my prize?”

“Me not breaking your face for asking so many useless questions.”

Eren didn't pout, but he slumped in his seat and folded his arms. “I was just wondering, is all.”

“Wonder quietly. You exhaust me.”

“Do you want me to drive?”

“Do I look like an idiot?”

Eren considered him thoughtfully. “Not right now, no.”

“I'm gonna murder you.”

“You would miss me.”

“Only the parts of you that don't talk.”

The drove for a while longer, sniping and throwing harmless barbs at each other. It was keeping Eren relatively distracted, anyway. He was dreading tonight, though. Alone in bed, there was no way that his thoughts wouldn't wander.

As if thinking about it had brought it to fruition, Levi was pulling into the driveway of a bed and breakfast.

“I feel like this is your worst germ nightmare,” Eren said as he eyed the place up. To be honest, even in the blue evening light, the place looked homey and fresh. Lush bushes and flowers lined the path up to the house and the grass looked neat and trimmed. It looked very welcoming and, from the outside, well kept.

“The things I do for you.”

“I don't even really know what you're doing for me, though,” Eren said a they rounded the car and made for the popped trunk. They both grabbed their own bags and wandered up the stone path to the front porch.

“Which is fine. You can wait until tomorrow.”

“You're such a secret drama queen. You love it.”

Levi shot him a dark look before he turned the knob and held open the door for Eren. “Get inside
and don't talk.”

They were met by a kind, elderly couple in the foyer. They seemed to recognise Levi immediately, and hurried to usher him to his 'usual room'. The house was lovely and pristine, well-decorated and cosy. Eren wondered if his home would have looked more like this, had his mom been around longer.

Absently, he rubbed the heel of his hand over his heart when it splintered at the thought.

They were given the key to their room and bid goodnight.

“So, you've been here more than once?” Eren said as he watched Levi unlock the door and stride in.

“Periodically.”

“To visit that person that reminds you of me?”

“Eren, I'm tired. Twenty questions can wait for tomorrow.”

Eren stood in the doorway, blinking in surprise at Levi's back as he dropped his duffel on a chair and unzipped it. Eren was fairly sure that was the first admittance of weakness he'd ever heard from Levi. It felt bizarre, but also kind of empowering to think that they could be on the same level, and that Eren wasn't constantly running to keep up with Levi's pristine footprints.

Nodding in understanding, Eren shut the door behind him – and gawked. He realised there was only one large bed in the room.

“Um.”

Levi pulled a toiletry bag from his things and looked disinterestedly over his shoulder. “What?”

Eren reminded himself that he was an adult. And that sharing a bed was not a big deal. Not even if you were sharing it with your ridiculously bangable... whatever Levi was to him.

“Nothing,” Eren said, nodding. “Nothing at all. I'm gonna turn on the news, if that's okay.”

“Knock yourself out. Or, literally knock yourself out. I may actually get some rest that way.”

“Hilarious.” Eren kicked off his shoes and grabbed the remote that sat on the bedside table. Flopping belly-first on the bed, he flicked on the television and idly flipped through the channels.

“Showering,” Levi said shortly, then disappeared into the adjoining bathroom.

The moment Levi had evacuated the space, Eren's frown returned in full force. Folding his arms on the bedspread and resting his cheek atop, Eren yawned and wondered how he would ever fall asleep lying next to Levi. Would Levi like put a fort of pillows between them so that Eren didn't molest him in the night? Or did Levi have ulterior motives for choosing a single bed room? Although, maybe he hadn't considered that at all, as the nice couple downstairs had just automatically taken him to his usual room. Maybe -

Eren was out like a light.

“Come on, now,” Levi's voice murmured quietly in his ear. “You're lying the wrong way on the bed, kid.”

“Hng.” Eren was distantly aware of being manoeuvred around, but kept his eyes blissfully closed.
His lids were so heavy anyway, and Levi's familiar voice hugged him like a warm, fluffy duvet.

“You're all legs, aren't you,” Levi said under his breath.

There were quick, competent fingers at Eren's zipper, and he automatically canted his hips, allowing his jeans to be stripped from him. His socks went next. Eren mumbled under his breath and rolled back onto his stomach, smushing his face into the downy pillow.

“You're making my life a living hell right now, you know that?” Levi muttered, sounding far away. Eren heard the lights click off and the mattress groan with a weight beside him. “I'm sure you don't. Shitty brat.”

The last thing Eren recalled before drifting away again, was the clean smell of Levi's skin, and a hand nestled warmly in his hair.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

I think we're probably around the half-way mark? It only took like over 50k, whatever!

Eren only woke because something was tickling his nose. Creaking one bleary eye open, Eren realised it was Levi's hair.

Oh god.

Eren altogether stopped breathing when it dawned on him where he was and what he was doing. Under him, sleeping with apparent oblivion to all of this, was Levi. Eren had managed to wedge a leg between Levi's thighs, and had flopped one arm across Levi's bare chest. Eren's cheek was rested on Levi's muscular shoulder, his nose nuzzling Levi's neck.

Eren released a slow, shaky breath, taking stock of what he was meant to do in this situation. But when he realised that he had no fucking pants on, and that they were both nearly-nakedly tangled together, Eren's already useless brain misfired and everything went south from there.

Slotting his body more firmly against Levi's, his knee very lightly rubbing up between Levi's legs, Eren tilted his head down to curiously inspect Levi's chest. The tattoos didn't just start at his elbows and stop at his shoulders. A loose, beaded rosary was inked around Levi's neck, ending in a crucifix. Eren thought that this tattoo didn't look like it belonged to a person who wanted to give up the priesthood.

With fingertips alone, Eren tentatively traced the line of the beads, where they climbed over the pronounced ridge of Levi's collarbone, where it shied just past his heart. For someone so viciously private, Eren was fascinated that he would tell so much of his story right beneath his clothes. Maybe there weren't many people with the privilege of knowing what secreted beneath the suits.

Levi's stomach quivered beneath Eren's touch. “Tickles,” Levi said with a grunt, throwing an arm over his eyes. The inside of his bicep sported a massive, intricate compass. At the south point was a skull and the north was a realistic heart.

“Sorry,” Eren murmured, tilted his chin so his lips brushed the angle of Levi's jaw. A faint shadow of stubble rasped pleasantly against Eren's mouth. “Sorry I fell asleep on you.”

“'Parently not enough t'move,” Levi said, sounding physically pained, not moving his arm.


Levi didn't answer for so long, and his breathing remained so even, that Eren thought he might've fallen back asleep.

“Levi?” Eren said quietly, his hand sliding from Levi's chest to stomach.

“Don't talk,” Levi snapped, sounding physically pained, not moving his arm.
“Huh?” Eren propped his elbow beside Levi's shoulder and rested his cheek on his palm, looking down with concern. “What's up?”

“I'm obviously displaying the best fucking self-control in the entire Midwest, you stupid little shit.”

Eren blinked at Levi and then it completely sunk in that Levi was doing his utmost to actually ignore Eren right now. No one had ever reacted to him like that and... and damn, it went straight to Eren's head. And fuck if his dick, which had already been half-hard upon waking, began to pulse insistently against Levi's hip.

“Um.” Eren's hand slid down, his fingers skimming the low-slung waistband of Levi's tight boxers, the tips just slipping under the edge of the fabric. Levi hissed softly and ground his hips back into the bed. Eren smiled. “Why d'you think you need to control yourself?”

When Levi didn't reply to that either, Eren took a breath and gathered his courage. Slipping his hand down Levi's boxers, Eren's breath hitched as he firmly wrapped his fingers around Levi's very obviously interested cock. In the same moment, his lips were at Levi's ear, his teeth nipping sharply at the lobe. “Leeevi, come and play. You wanna hurt my feelings?”

The breath was knocked out of him as Eren was flipped onto his back, but he recovered enough to shamelessly smile up at his assailant. Levi's cheeks were already flushed, his eyes catching Eren's with a fathomless intensity that had Eren's smile faltering, if just for a second.

“Anyone ever tell you you're a manipulative brat?” Levi said as he seated himself back atop Eren's aching dick. Sure hands grappled with the hem of Eren's t-shirt and Eren laughed breathlessly as he sat up long enough for the shirt to be yanked over his head and tossed. He flopped back onto the mattress and bucked his hips playfully, rutting his swollen dick along the crease of Levi's tight, perfect ass. Eren felt electric, felt wanted, felt powerful. It was enough to make him high.

“Nope.”

“You are,” Levi said lurching forward to cup Eren's face in both hands and plunder his mouth with unrelenting teeth and tongue. Their chests pressed flush, Eren's arms encircling Levi, his hands ranging over the curve of muscle and bone, learning the width of his hips, urgently gripping Levi's ass and coaxing them into a slow drag of covered cock against cock.

Levi's thumb brushed Eren's bottom lip in between breathy kisses, and Eren instinctively turned his head and took it into his mouth, scraping his teeth over the sensitive pad and messily curling his tongue around it.

“Christ,” Levi said on a loud, unsteady exhale, his attention darkly trained on Eren's active mouth.

Levi made Eren feel more alive than he could ever remember. Arching his back, Eren bit down on his own lip, chewing it distractedly as he increased the furious speed at which their cocks slotted against each other's. His hands went up to grip the iron bars of the headboard, his hips jutting forward erratically.

“Eren,” Levi said, barely audible beneath the rhythmic creak of the bed and the iron slapping against the wall.

Eren made a little sound that could hardly constitute as communication, but he couldn't stop watching the lithe movement of Levi's hips, the way his muscles shifted and tensed under that beautifully pale, blushing skin. Levi had a midnight black happy trail that Eren would do anything to follow with his mouth.
“Eren, look at me.”

The command had Eren's attention snapping to Levi, his hips jerking in response. Levi's lips were swollen and parted, his stare taking in every inch of him. “Beautiful,” Levi murmured, one hand sliding up Eren's ribs, his arm, and finally overlapping Eren's fingers around one of the iron bars. “How the fuck're you so beautiful?”

Eren gasped at that, his movements growing more frantic, his cock painfully hard and crying for release. His hand reached around Levi's nape, gripped him close as their mouths met again. With a soft, needy gasp, Eren parted his lips and welcomed Levi in, desperately memorising his taste, the feel of their mouths together like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Levi's deep, guttural moan was enough to start Eren off that sharp, shining peak. Eren knew he was chanting Levi's name against his lips, but couldn't stop for anything as Levi hand moved his hands up the bars of the headboard, his fists well above Eren's as he loomed over him and began to ride his dick in hard, unforgiving dips and drags.

“Lemme see you come,” Levi gritted out, “You make it fucking impossible t'think of anything else.”

Eren forgot how to breathe. His eyes widened and met Levi's, in that moment, hot stars burst before his vision, filled him and battered him hard from the inside out. He distantly heard Levi's wrecked voice murmur, “Jesus fuck, Eren,” before Levi was burying his face in Eren's neck and shuddering in his arms.

Gaping at the ceiling and gulping for breath, Eren dimly marvelled at the glow he felt within him. Never had he felt so desired – so fuckable. They hadn't even had sex and Eren already knew they would be so in tune that it would be surreal. What was most unbelievable, however, was how deliciously receptive Levi had been to everything Eren did. Like Eren mattered.


Eren couldn't help but close his eyes and, with a small smile, slide his hand along the length of Levi's spine. The guy had lean, toned muscles that had Eren's mouth salivating all over again.

“What's your problem?” Eren said, with a relaxed yawn.

“Can't believe I kissed you before you brushed your teeth,” Levi said, his breath tickling Eren's throat.

Eren snorted a laugh and smacked Levi on the ass, earning a warning growl. “You fucking kidding me? That's your first reaction to all of this?”

“I didn't know there was a protocol,” Levi said, rolling off of Eren and landing beside him on the bed. His limbs star-fished out, one knee comfortably hooked over Eren's thigh. He rolled his head to the side, eyeing Eren from head to toe, then back up. “You really are a manipulative little shit.”

Eren gave his sweetest smile. “Only when I really want something.”

“Flattered, I'm sure,” Levi said dryly, reaching out to sift his fingers through Eren's hair.

“Psh. Don't act like you didn't want to.”

Levi's hand paused in Eren's hair as he met Eren's eyes, then resumed their movement. “Did it seem like I didn't?”
“Um.” Eren felt his face go red.

“Cute,” Levi said quietly.

“Huh?”

“We need to get ready, you little hussy. Time to get our asses in gear.”

Eren made a noncommittal noise and stretched, long and languid, his hips lifting off the bed as he felt his joints pop and his body realign.

“Stop that.”

Eren whipped his head to the side and boggled. “What, stretching? It’s just stretching!”

“It’s fucking disgustingly pornographic when you do it.”

“And you’re saying you don’t like that?”

Levi aimed an abysmal stare at Eren before he heaved a sigh and sat up. “I’m showering. Don’t follow.”

Eren laughed brightly. “Yes, sir!” He was still laughing when Levi left the room.

***

The old couple that ran the B&B had offered Eren and Levi a full breakfast when they’d packed and headed downstairs, but Eren had opted for toast and Levi had passed altogether. As they got in the car, preparing for another few hours of driving, Eren said, “Levi.”

He buckled his seatbelt and turned. “Wha-”

Eren shoved a piece of toast in Levi’s mouth and grinned. “If you eat, I eat. Anyway, you’re small-”

“I will rip your dick off.”

“-arter. Smarter than me. Very intelligent. Yup. Let’s drive.”

At the back of Eren’s mind, he was aware that something heavy was going down. Levi wasn’t just taking him away from the house so that he could escape his trauma of the tape and his painful history. Levi was taking him out because whatever he had to say was so private to him that he needed to go somewhere where he’d be more comfortable talking about it. And if that meant his home city, then so be it.

Eren managed to be quiet for nearly an hour – or, well, not exactly quiet. He had the radio on to something that predominantly played pop, and hummed or sang along to most the tracks. Every time he thought about this morning, and the open look of desire on Levi’s face when he’d looked at him, Eren made a point of turning away to grin out the window. The last thing he wanted was Levi noticing that.

“So, Detroit?” Eren said.

Levi shot him a look. “Yeah.”

“I’ve never been. I heard there’s a lot of rough areas.”
“I'm from those areas.”

Eren enthusiastically turned in his seat, folding one leg under him. “Seriously? Man, I knew you were a thug.”

“Excuse me?”

“It's not the tattoos or anything – but holy shit, they are both hot and distracting. I mean, the way you talk sometimes.”


Eren shrugged. “Just, sometimes you drop this whole -” he waved a hand at Levi, encompassing him up and down, “thing, and then you speak like you've got a knife in your boot and a baseball bat behind your back or something.”

Levi didn't reply, which was as good a confirmation as any.

“So, you grew up in a shitty side of the city,” Eren prompted, hoping for more.

Levi grunted in response. He almost looked like he was sulking.

“Oh, come on, tell me. You know everything about me already. I'm boring. You're not.”

“You're not boring.”

Eren frowned and sat back in his seat, looking out his window. He didn't know what to say to that.

Levi cleared his throat. “I lived with my mom in a shithole apartment building up until I was eighteen. Then shit went down, I moved out and never saw her again.”

“What?” Eren was back to facing Levi, leaning in across the gear stick. “How could you abandon your mom?”

“Kid, this was not a parent anyone would want forced on them.” A shadow passed over Levi's expression, and he suddenly looked old, aged beyond his years. “We lived in filth. More than half the time it was just me there while she was off getting some new and improved STD from fuck knows where. She was a human piece of shit and I don't regret a single thing.”

Eren swallowed hard, fighting back the urge to lunge across the distance between them and wrap his arms around Levi. “Your dad?”

“Never met him.” Levi shrugged, but the motion was so practised it reminded Eren of the smiles he'd invented in the mirror to make everyone think he was normal.

Dropping the subject, Eren rested his temple on the window and watched the world speed by. He wondered what life would have been like if his father had wholly abandoned him.

A lot different. The thing was, Dad had been shitty after Mom died. He'd mourned in silence and depression, while Eren had mourned in rage. The two of them had not mixed well in the house. But their home had remained clean. There'd been food in the fridge – although I was only ever cooked properly after Eren had gained some culinary skills. Because an education had always been important to Dad, he'd never brushed Eren aside when he'd asked for help with school work. Eren could think of very few intimate father-son moments between them – but he'd never left. He'd never abandoned Eren when he'd been needed.
Until now.

“Do you play an instrument?” Levi asked so suddenly that Eren swore he got whiplash from his immediate double-take.

“What, no – why?”

“You do sing surprisingly well. You should learn the guitar to accompany. You'd probably like it.”

Eren blinked. He felt like he was talking to an alternate universe version of Levi where he was friendly and normal and made small-talk like regular people.

“I... you like my voice?”

“Are we back to this thing were I have to repeat everything twice? It just crossed my mind, I thought I'd mention it.” Levi scowled at the road.

“Oh. Well, thanks? But I don't want to learn guitar from, like, YouTube.”

“I'll teach you.”

Eren snorted. “You'll teach me?”

“Yes, you shitty brat. Am I not allowed to know how to play the fucking guitar?”

“Really?” Eren brightened up. “I'd love to learn something like that. I feel like I have a pathetically small skillset.”

“Does a skill count as your brain functioning properly, because I'll be the first to agree that you'd be best to hone that one first.”

Eren lightly punched Levi in the arm, which earned him an unfairly hard punch in return. But Eren just grinned to himself, turned up the radio, and sang along.

***

“Wow,” Eren said quietly as he surveyed the area in which they were parked. “I could've used some warning for this one.”

Levi stared blandly out the wind shield. “Had I told you, you would’ve asked too many questions.”

“Yeah, okay, I'll give you that,” Eren said tersely. “But I don't think you took into consideration that you can't fucking see what I can, Levi. Selfish dick.”

Levi didn't seem perturbed, though. He just got out of the car and, when Eren wouldn't budge, Levi ducked his head in and shot Eren with a dark look. “If you want to be a priest, then this won't be the last time you're in a cemetery, Jeager. So suck it the fuck up and get outta the car.”

Eren closed his eyes, centred himself, and slunk out of the car, slamming the door closed with too much force. A grimace on his face, Eren faced not just a cemetery, but a shitload of spirits lurking at their final resting places. Eren never even liked these kinds of place when he wasn't seeing dead people.

Wrapping his arms around himself for comfort, Eren trailed behind Levi as they both weaved between gravestones, careful where they stepped.
“Who the fuck are you?” An old man spat at him from his spot, where he leaned against his headstone.

“No one,” Eren muttered.

“What?” Levi said, not looking at him.

“Oh, I'm sorry. Were you talking to me? Because – augh!” Eren flapped his arm as a small child tried to hold his hand. “Because I'm too busy wading through a goddamn theme park of dead people, Levi. Honestly, what the fuck were you thinking?”

“Get a haircut!” the old guy yelled after him. “You look like a lady!”

“I – wow. Maybe I'm comfortable looking like a lady.”

Levi turned to stare at him.

“Who the hell are you talking to about looking like a woman?”

“Uh, excuse me, but don't you dare look at me like I'm crazy.” Eren stomped over and jammed a finger against Levi's chest. “This had better be good, Levi, because I was having a really nice spirit-free day and now you've fucked it up.”

Levi nodded solemnly. “It's important.”

“I – ugh.” Eren sighed and ran his hands through his hair, absently wishing for that rubber band to tie it back, now. “Fine. But you owe me. This is shitty.”

“Fine.”

With that, Eren resolutely grabbed Levi's hand and threaded their fingers together. “If someone tries to drag me away, just keep walking. And if you let go, you'll find yourself a member of this little graveyard of horrors.”

Levi just nodded and squeezed Eren's hand, continuing forward.

“Please,” a middle-aged woman impacted into Eren's shoulder, her hands scrabbling for purchase on his chest. She must have been old and week, because her nails were only vague prickles through his clothes. “Please,” she screamed in desperation. “Please tell them my husband didn't do it!”

Eren frowned and kept walking, looking over his shoulder as the woman dropped to her knees. She sobbed into her hands, her forehead falling to the grass as she curled up into herself and wept.

“What's your name?” Eren called at her.

She looked up, her thin face haggard and shadowed, even in the bright sunlight. She smiled, tears running down her cheeks. “I can't remember.”

“Eren?”

Eren looked back to Levi, rubbing at one damp eye. “It's nothing.”

“Is it... what's it like?” Levi asked quietly. Unfortunately, he was blissfully unaware that Eren could barely hear him over some guy who was standing on top of his tombstone and screaming bloody murder. He waited until they'd passed him by before he shrugged.
“It’s horrific. So many spirits haven’t passed on. So many of them are miserable. It’s worst seeing the children. I don’t think they even know they’re dead. They’re just running around, playing like it’s all normal. Ignorance is worse than anything else in this life – or death.”

“I’m sorry,” Levi said, turning away and continuing to walk. “I’ll try to be quick.”

“Eh, don’t worry about it,” Eren said, feeling bad that he’d complained, when Levi was obviously about to share something with him that was extremely important to him. “We’re already here, anyway. And I need to learn to be in crowded places and still deal with this ability. The house has been too easy on me.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call it easy. We're here.”

Levi stopped abruptly, and Eren bumped into his back. Still holding his hand, Eren peered over his shoulder and looked down.

“Isabel... Magnolia. Is this -”

“She’s the reason I do what I do. Or, did.” Levi unlaced his fingers from Eren's and plucked from his pocket a rumpled pack of cigarettes and a red lighter. He slipped two out and brought them both to his mouth, lighting them with one flame. He sucked the cherries to a bright burn, then removed one from his lips and placed it atop the flat headstone, where it quietly began to burn away.

“I've never seen you smoke before,” Eren said, unsure of what to say in this situation.

“I don't. Not anymore. We used to – together.”

“Oh.” Eren hung his head, looking at the dates on the stone. “She died when she was a teenager?”

“We were the same age. Growing up, I didn’t have a lot of friends. Didn't want 'em, didn't need 'em,” Levi said, his manner of speech faintly roughening as he spoke of the past. “It was a miracle if I went to school the full five days in a week. I was in and out of juvie here and there. Minor offences.”

Eren felt like he was hearing how he might have ended up had his father not kept such a tight leash on him. He'd been expelled from one of his high schools for starting and, consequently, finishing a fight in spectacularly bloody fashion.

Levi drew the cigarette from his lips, tilted his chin and blew grey ribbons to the sky. “One day I was getting the shit beat outta me by some guy three times the size'a me. This girl – this tiny as hell girl in a fucking Catholic school girl uniform runs in – picks up a piece of plywood, and breaks it right over the guy's head.”

Taking another puff of his cigarette and leaving it hanging off his bottom lip, Levi crouched before the tombstone and started to pick out little weeds that had grown around it. “I refused to go to the hospital. She went to the drug store around the corner and did first-aid while we were just sitting on the dirty sidewalk. All the while, she's fuckin' reaming me with words I've only ever heard come out of my mouth.”

Levi's lips curved at the corners, his gaze tracking Isabel's name over and over. “Isabel was a good person. Not one of those shitty douchebags who act holier-than-thou, but fuck whores behind their wife's back or smack their kids because it'll put the fear of God into 'em. She was a good person. She was obnoxiously tenacious – like a dog with a bone. Never stopped talking. Never lied.” Levi jerked a shoulder. “Isabel was my best friend.”

Eren crouched beside him and dropped his temple onto Levi's shoulder. “What happened?”
“She kept trying to get me into the church. She said it'd be good for me. If I learned to forgive and all that shit. She said I was gonna destroy myself, that I was gonna burn out before I had a chance to actually have a life.”

Eren remembered Levi's furious words. They seemed like years ago. He'd told Eren not to bring the past with him. That he couldn't live like that - that it would bury him.

“For our entire relationship, I refused to step into a church. I didn't see the point. She'd go to school there and come back and read me passages. I liked to hear her voice, and although I pretended not to care about what she had to say, I listened. She was the first person I ever really listened to.”

“And then?” Eren said softly.

“And then she... then she was possessed. Demons love the innocent ones. The good souls. The purer the soul, the more fun they have trashing it. And they did a number on her. I was eighteen when I lost the only person I ever loved.”

Eren stiffened. “Like, in love?”

“Loved. At all.” Levi jerkily yanked the cigarette from his mouth and crushed it in the grass. He placed the stub atop the headstone, right beside Isabel's smouldering one. His eyes were as hard and grey as the stone before him.

Relaxing again, Eren shifted and kissed Levi's hair, moving to stand before he got into trouble for it. “What did you do, then?”

“Erwin had been an apprentice to the priest who'd failed Isabel's exorcism. He knew the basics of my situation, mostly because I'd refused to leave Isabel's side the entire time. He started to come 'round to mine, hassling me and shit. He was the one who convinced me that I'd end up in an early grave right next to this girl if I didn't get my act together and find something that I wanted to do with my life.”

“And you chose the priesthood, because...”

“Because I never wanted to see anyone hurt like Isabel. I didn't want anyone else to die and leave behind the people who loved them.”

Eren was point-blank struck with the realisation that they wanted to be the same thing for the exact same reason. He sucked in a breath and looked away, roughly wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. He didn't know why he was crying.

Maybe he did. Maybe it was nice to know that he wasn't alone. Maybe it was just nice to know he wasn't a fool.

“So... You think I'm like Isabel?”

Levi rose to his full height with a sigh, automatically sliding his hands down his thighs to smooth the creases of his trousers. “I think that in some ways you're better. She was stupidly optimistic. Thought most everything could be cured with love and hugs. She believed that everyone was as understanding and accepting as herself. She was naïve.”

“That's not a very nice thing to say about someone who's deceased.”

“She knew it was true. But you – you know that you have to fight.” Levi turned to face Eren, his gaze reaching out to him. “You’re stronger than me, Eren. I made it this far, but I still hate people,
most of the time. I still have a lot of anger in me. But you're not like that. People love you because you bring that attitude with you. You walk into a room and people fall for you instantly.”

Eren’s heart caught in his throat. He searched Levi’s face for a sign of something more than his words, but found only a carefully placed shield.

“Th-thanks,” Eren whispered, his hands diving into his pockets, for lack of anything better to do.

Levi shrugged a shoulder and looked away, down to Isabel’s stone. He reached out, brushed his fingertips over the top, and turned away.

“Let’s go, Jaeger.”

“I – yeah, okay. Wait, hey wait.”

Facing Isabel’s grave, Eren dropped to his knees before it and pressed a hand to the stone. He closed his eyes and drowned out the world, let it swirl around and away from him. The stone felt warm under his palm, a light pulse, a soft electric current nipping at his fingers. Eren hummed in approval and opened his eyes, standing once more and turning.

Levi was staring at him with narrowed eyes. “What the hell did you just do?”

“I was just... checking.”

“For?”

Eren shrugged. “To see if Isabel was okay. And, you know what? I got the feeling that she is. So, you don't have to worry anymore, okay?”

Levi’s eyes widened, his unbidden shock fixed on Eren’s face. And then, right before Eren, Levi’s expression brightened and he smiled crookedly, flashing perfect teeth and laughing softly as he shook his head.

“Alright, Jaeger. Thanks. I won't worry anymore. Now let's go. It's a long ride home.”

Home. Eren liked the way that sounded. He ran after Levi to catch up and tucked his arm in the crook of Levi’s elbow. Eren looked up to the sky and beamed. Something important had just happened.

When Levi smiled at Eren, an entire world had opened up.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

OKAY, READ THIS, READ THIS, EVEN IF YOU DON'T NORMALLY READ THIS, PLEASE DO:

I've decided to celebrate 10,000 hits of this fic by putting out a little bunch of drabbles that are connected to TSATU. I'm not AT 10,000, but I'm telling you guys this now so that when I hit 10,000 I can already have the drabbles ready.

And I'm letting you guys decide what you want to read. There are some bits and scenes that I have in mind, but nothing set in stone, yet. Basically, you guys can request anything, and hopefully it'll make the final cut!

You could ask for a scene from another character's perspective. You could ask for a scene that has just Eren or just Levi in it. You could ask for a side character's thoughts on something, or how they viewed a scene, or request a missing scene between two or more side charries. When you comment, you can make a request, or you can shoot me a message (anon or not) on my tumblr at atomicblonde.

OKAY, THAT'S IT, NOW TO FIC.

“How did you know how to do that?” Levi said after some time in the car. "At the cemetery."

Eren, who'd been half-dozing against the window, yawned. “Dunno. I've just been following my instincts, I guess. I try to imagine that if I want it to work, I'll make it work – and then just try and trust myself to make it happen.”

“You're getting stronger.”

“Okay, let's not talk about me like I'm some kind of baddy from a TV show.”

“Don't be so fucking dramatic. I'm taking note. It's important to everyone that we keep tabs on your abilities. How they manifest themselves, and what the drawbacks are of what you can do.”

Eren huffed quietly, but he knew it was a true. He didn't like feeling like he was under Hanji's or anyone's microscope, but that's what he'd signed up for. But he didn't have to like it.

“I mean, obviously I had some of this going on when I was... when I was a kid,” Eren said, swallowing the thick dread that obstructed his throat. Hushed, Eren said, “I pulled that thing – Lilith. I pulled her out of my mom. If I was that strong when I was child, what does that make me now?”

“That's what we need to figure out.”

“Yeah,” Eren said, looking down at his hands and picking at a hangnail.

After a few minutes of silence, Levi sighed. “What?”

“What do you mean, what?”
“What're you sulking about?”

“I'm not sulking,” Eren snapped. “I'm not a little kid.”

“Fine,” Levi said sharply, dropping the subject. His hands clenched and unclenched on the wheel, as if he were inwardly warring with something. A few miles down, he said, “I don't think you're stupid. Irrational and impulsive, but not stupid.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“What I'm saying is you can talk about the shit on your mind. If you have to.”

Eren mulled that over, sneaking a look at Levi's profile. He looked grouchy, which just meant that he was uncomfortable. “Thanks.”

“Gross. You don't need to thank me over something so stu- ridiculous.”

A smile eked it's way over Eren's face. He glance sideways at Levi. “If it's so important to know, I was wondering if my dad actually loves me at all. After what I did.”

Eren was proud that his voice didn't crack, and that he was able to keep his composure. Merely speaking the words felt like cracking his chest open and watching the contents spill messily over his hands.

“Eren...” Levi looked over, his brows lowered, his mouth a thin line. “You'd have to find that out for yourself.”

Eren released a shaky breath and shifted to stare at the highway. “Yeah, I know.”

“But if that is the case, then he is stupid.”

Chewing on his bottom lip, Eren peered out the window and wondered if it was okay to wish, just for a second, that he never had to go back. That he could just keep driving with Levi to anywhere, nowhere.

It was a nice thought, anyway.

Quietly, Eren said, “If I was him, I'd never forgive me.”

He knew he'd never forgive himself, anyway.

A weighted cloak of silence dropped over them, and didn't lift for what felt like hours. Eren was just drifting off when Levi's even tone cut in.

“Hungry?”

“Not really.”

“Too bad.”

Shortly after, they were stopping at another diner. This one claimed the best triple decker bacon cheeseburgers. Because apparently there were enough restaurants serving a triple meat burger that they could claim this title.

“I thought you were a healthy eater,” Eren said as they slammed the car doors and meandered towards the building. He made a point not to brush up against Levi. When Eren felt this way – like
he was so far down, there was no getting up – the last thing he wanted was human contact. He'd grown up learning to face his pain inwards, and so he continued the habit.

“I thought you'd graduated in Sports Science. Which is basically glorified health.”

“Got me there,” Eren said without much intonation.

Levi glanced up at him, but said nothing in return. When they were directed to their booth, Eren immediately ordered the triple bacon cheeseburger, because it was the first thing advertised on the menu. He didn't have the stomach for it, but eating was important, so he'd choke it down.

Eren was staring into the cheerful, bubbly carbonation of his cherry soda, idly sucking on the straw, when Levi said, “We don't need to go back tonight, if you don't want to.”

Looking up with a furrowed brow, Eren remained hunched around his drink. “Why?”

“I get the impression you'd rather escape. And although that isn't an option, there is one place we can stay for the night, if you'd like to delay the trip home.”

Eren glanced down into his glass and sloshed his straw around in the drink. “Where?”

“A long time ago, Erwin, Hanji and I bought a house together, on a lake about an hour from here. We were originally going to use it as another one of the halfway houses for victims, but we were needed in the Chicago area, so it was abandoned. Now, we basically use it for vacation days.”

“Um.” It sounded too good to be true. “Don't you have things to get back to?”


Hesitating for a second, Eren just nodded silently, and was thrilled when the food came. He needed the distraction.

He was more hungry than he'd realised, because he'd decimated the titanic burger and fries in record time. Eren was glad for at least Levi remembering that they had to eat.

But Eren remained mostly silent through the meal. Although he'd felt uplifted by his day with Levi, the fact was that they were heading back, and he couldn't keep shoving his anxiety and upset to the side.

When he returned, he was going to have to speak with his father. He also needed to sort out his future and what he wanted to do with it.

And, worst of all, Eren knew that upon arriving home, he would have to face Levi, Father Erwin, and Hanji. He needed to tell them what was really going on with him. The voices in his head. The ringing of his ears. The feeling that he was never completely alone. The black halo. They had to know. Keeping quiet about it wasn't the same as it getting better.

“Hey, brat, snap out of it,” Levi said, throwing a few bills on the table and standing. “Let's go.”

Eren wordlessly followed, his hands shoved in his pockets. He squinted into the sunny day as they exited the restaurant and marvelled at how he could feel so dull on an afternoon so cheerful.

Inhaling deep, fresh air, Eren gave himself a mental kick up the ass. Yes, he had a lot on his plate. Yes, things weren't so great in the grand scheme of things. But he wasn't going to lie down and let life fuck him over. Levi had said that he was a fighter, and Eren wasn't going to let him down. He
wasn't going to let himself down.

Eren exhaled a breath he'd been holding too long and nodded slightly, walking a bit faster, with a bounce in his step. He caught up to Levi and, before they both got in, grinned at him over the top of the car.

“Did you say this place was on a lake?”


Eren bit down on his bottom lip, a playful smile spreading. “Swimming.”

Huffing a soft laugh, Levi rolled his eyes and ducked down to get in the car. He muttered, “Absolute child.”

Eren yanked open the door and dropped onto his seat. The moment Levi started the car, Eren flicked on the radio, turned it up and enthusiastically sang out the window, “I belong with you, you belong with me, you're my sweatheaaart! I belong with you, you belong with me, you're my sweet.”

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“Holy shit!” Eren stumbled out of the car, barely able to stop long enough to shut his door before he was running at the house. It sat on the edge of a large, sparkling blue lake, the rhythmic waves lapping at the shore mere yards from the back porch. It wasn't a large house – taller than it was wide, almost. A half dozen mature oak trees crowned it in deep shade, and this was the most magical place Eren had ever set his eyes on.

Sunlight dappled between the vibrantly green leaves and freckled the plush grass as Eren literally ran around the side of the house and barrelled down the short, rickety dock. Screeching to a halt before he fell into the lake, Eren caught his breath and gaped at the view.

He could see the entirety of the lake, and the beautiful glass and stone houses that speckled the waters edge. On the far far left, over a half mile down, was a sandy beach, and what looked like families and children running around. A few small motor boats cut white, foaming lines across the dark blue waters, and a couple of houses down, two girls sat in on the same inflatable raft and briefly touched lips.

Eren's face hurt from smiling. This felt like heaven and he'd only been here for five minutes. Something about this place resonated with him on a very basic level. The thickly forested area that they'd had to drive through to find this hidden sapphire gem – the vibrant energy that seemed to emanate from Eren's toes and through his body.

He never wanted to leave.

“Happy?” Levi's said from behind him.

Eren looked over his shoulder and beamed with everything he had in him. “Never happier.”

Something in the landscape of Levi's usual placid expression changed. His eyes softened, taking on the mercurial blue-grey of the lake, and his lips parted softly as he outright stared at Eren. As if he were in awe.

Eren's voice caught in his throat, his emotions tripping and tangling around each other as they fought to categorise this look that had Eren speechless. “Levi,” he said softly, barely audible above the clap of waves against the dock. “Can I -”
“God, yes.”

Eren lunged at Levi, wrapping his arms around his small, sturdy frame, gripping him tight at the waist as their lips met in desperation, in pure need for the closeness of each other. Levi's arms slung around Eren's neck, pulling him in closer, closer until the only space between them was the split seconds in which they broke apart, gasped for breath, and switched angles.

Their mouths met with starved eagerness, like they'd both been lost in the desert and met halfway in this oasis. Levi's hand fisted in Eren's hair and held him fast, his body arched flush against Eren's. There was no turning back, and Eren never wanted to.

Levi felt different in Eren's arms. The urgency and demand remained, but it was soothed as the kiss gentled and Levi's fingers released Eren's hair to stroke and slide down the back of his neck. This was, essentially, their first embrace, and Levi held Eren like he was priceless.

Strong hands smoothed over Eren's jaw to cup his face and encourage his lips closer, as if Levi feared Eren might break the kiss too soon. With a soft sigh, Eren banded his arms around Levi a little tighter, in wordless reassurance. Damp, warm kisses whispered across Eren's lips, and Eren was dimly aware that he felt like floating away.

The thought caught Eren by surprise, and he smiled against Levi's mouth, a laugh bubbling up between them. Levi pulled away just enough to stare at him in annoyance – or, what Eren imagined Levi hoped was annoyance, because it was anything but. He mostly still looked like he wanted to rip Eren's clothes off.

“What?” Levi said, his voice husky enough to make Eren want to fucking weep with it's beauty.

Eren didn't dare tell Levi that he'd just experienced the most romantic moment in his life. Levi very obviously was not one for romance – and Eren couldn't even tell if they were together or whatever. Eren had made that mistake in the past with other guys. He'd been burned before.

Eren didn't consider himself particularly romantic, either. Or maybe he'd just never met a person who made him hear music, who gave him wings.

Grinning, Eren leaned in until their foreheads bumped. Levi looked so adorably grumpy over their impromptu makeout interruption that Eren was overwhelmed with the urge to muss him up further.

“I was just thinking that I would love a swim.”

“I – sure.”

Eren's smile widened. It was nice to see Levi's brain malfunction for once. Although Eren couldn't place what he'd done any differently, he wasn't about to look a gift Jean – or, horse – in the mouth.

“Oh, good,” Eren said, unable to keep the giddiness from his voice or the gleam from his eye. “Because I think we both need a cool-down.”

Levi's entire bearing snapped to attention, his gaze glinting with menace. “Don't you fucking dare, Ja-”

With a hoot of glee, Eren jumped off the dock and took Levi with him.

Eren came up sputtering and laughing, but not for long, because Levi was clinging to his back in a hot minute. Levi shimmed up Eren's shoulders and sat on top of them with his thighs crunching Eren's neck. He was as spitting mad as a cat thrown in the bath.
“Do you know how much this fucking suit cost, you stupid little shit?” Levi smacked Eren upside the head, seeming to vibrate with rage when Eren just laughed harder and gripped Levi's ankles to keep him from toppling back into the water.

Unfortunately for Eren, it also kept Levi steady as he grabbed Eren by the hair and dunked his face into the water. Eren emerged choking and, with no time to react, yelped as Levi used all of his weight to throw himself back and drag Eren under with him.

Eren broke through the water, sputtering and whipping his head around, his long hair spraying sparkling droplets in every direction.

“You're like an overgrown puppy,” Levi grumbled, slicking his hair back so his undercut was starkly visible. His short, thick eyelashes were wetly clumped together in spikes, and his eyes were a light, silvery shade that Eren hadn't previously seen on him.

Shaking off his daze, Eren lightly splashed Levi as they both easily tread water before each other. “And you're like a feral cat sprayed with a hose.”

“Yeah, well – what're you doing?” Levi said flatly.

“Well, it's not like I can swim in these heavy clothes.” Eren sunk a little as he yanked his sneakers off, his head going under for a second. He came up with a triumphant noise, holding his shoes above his head.

Levi stared at him blandly, but, to Eren's surprise, followed suit with his own horrendously expensive-looking shoes. With an accuracy that had Eren seriously impressed, Levi tossed his shoes onto the dock, where they could bake and dry in the beating sun.

Determined to do one better, Eren launched his shoes with all his might at the shoreline. Thankfully, for his pride, they made it. When he turned back, Eren gaped.

Levi had stripped his suit jacket – hell, he shouldn't have been wearing it on a glorious day like today, anyway. His stark white shirt was popped open at the collar, and the thin material clung to him so cleanly that the shadows of his tattoos were fighting for view.

“I kind of just remembered,” Eren said as he peeled off his t-shirt and slapped it on the surface of the lake with a loud splat. “Those were my only shoes. And these are my only jeans.”

“Sucks to be you. You'll just have to walk around naked.”

Eren was brave, but he wasn't that brave. Certainly not around someone to which he was attracted. His face went up in flame and he silently dunked his head under water. When he came back up, it was to the sound of Levi's clear, honest laughter tailing off.

Levi ran a hand down his face to wipe away more lake water, his smirk a little bit crooked as he considered Eren. “Idiot. Hanji's probably got some clothes lying in a drawer that'll fit you. You two are a similar build.”

“I... don't know if I'm okay with that or if it weirds me out.”

Eren got a splash of water to the face. “Or you could wear my clothes and look like you shrunk everything in the laundry.”

Making a face and shaking his head, Eren just said, “Fine.”
With a happy sigh, Eren lurched backwards and allowed the water to buoy him up. He shut his eyes against the sunshine and floated for a moment, perfectly content to remain like this forever. Except his jeans were seriously dragging him down.

“Come on, kid – inside. I need you out of the water so I can kick your ass across this lake.”

Eren pouted at Levi, but turned and took a few long strokes until his feet could touch the smooth, pebbled floor. He started to walk out of the water, his jeans clinging to him like a second skin and slung dangerously low on his lips. His steps made loud, clumsy splashes, and when he didn't hear mirrored sounds behind him, he curiously turned.

Levi had pulled himself up on to the dock. He'd already removed his shirt, and was in the process of sliding his pants down, revealing tight, black boxer briefs and an ass that had Eren's mouth watering. Flicking a look towards Eren, Levi sauntered down the dock without a hint of hesitation. What an asshole.

Eren tore his gaze away and emerged from the shore, dripping everywhere. He sidled up beside Levi with ease, purposely bumping against him.

Levi glanced over, his expression was openly curious. “How the hell do you get so brown?”

Peering down at his arms, Eren said, “My mom's family was Turkish. I basically tan within an hour of direct sunlight. Anything after an hour and I go so brown that I barely recognise myself.”

“I like it,” Levi said so offhandedly that Eren could barely be sure he'd heard the words. “I'm going to get the house keys from the car.” With that, he increased his speed and wandered off towards the driveway.

Eren blinked, cocking his head as he just watched that ass walk away. Jesus.

***

“Is there food in this house?” Eren said as he flopped on the couch beside Levi, wearing pink flowered boardshorts and black wifebeater from Hanji's closet.

Levi looked up from his cellphone, where he'd been texting rapid fire. For once, he was dressed like a normal person in black way-too-skinny jeans and a simple forest green shirt – all of which made him look nearly Eren's age. Levi inspected Eren's ensemble. Then he looked up, his eyebrows dropping. “You tied your hair up.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Eren ran his hand over the stubby ponytail, “It's getting really bad.”

Looking back down at his phone without comment, Levi returned to texting. Eren blew out a long breath, already bored with sitting. He got up and wandered the house some more. The whole place was really cute. There were three small bedrooms and two bathrooms, plus the kitchen and cozy living room. Everything was done up in relaxing shades of blues and teals, whites and creams, with well-worn, faded wood pieces. There was only one personal photograph in the entire house – excluding wall photos of the lake and stuff.

Eren had seen it in Hanji's room when he was getting dressed. Erwin, Hanji, and Levi in their very early twenties. Erwin had sported a severe buzzcut, but his smile had been wide and genuine, and his eyes warm and open – very unlike the person Eren was familiar with. Hanji was, well, a guy. So, that was kind of surreal to look at. The smile was the same, and the wildly spiked hair and glittering nose stud were enlightening.
And Levi – he’d had the largest transformation. He looked impossibly young and fresh-faced. The bruises beneath his eyes remained, but he’d also blackened them with eyeliner. His hair was shaved into a short mohawk that sported an undercurrent of deep blue beneath the black. His left ear was lined from top to bottom with piercings, and he was despondently crushed between his two best friends, while scowling at the camera.

Eren wasn’t sure how long he’d stared at the photo, smiling to himself, but he was sure it was an inappropriate amount of time, considering the guy he was ogling in the picture was just in the other room.

When he wandered back into the front room, Eren was assaulted by something he really didn’t want to see.

Levi, standing next to a pile of cleaning supplies. His arms were crossed over his chest, his hip cocked as he levelly met Eren’s gaze.

“You didn’t think you could ruin my suit without a punishment, did you?”

Eren groaned. “But you liked it.”

Levi’s eyebrow climbed. “I made the best of a shitty situation.”

“If by shitty, you mean awesome.”

“I don’t. Now, you clean and I’ll go buy food.”

“Why don’t we switch? You’re better at this anyway.”

“One, no. Two, you don’t know where anything is in this area. Three, stop trying to drive my car.”

Eren bit his tongue and slowly approached the mop and bucket. Levi tipped the mop handle with one finger and watched it fall towards Eren. Catching it and making a sour face at Levi, Eren said, “Fine. But if you’re disappointed with the job, you’re not allowed to complain.”

Levi leaned in over the pile of supplies, his eyes just shy of laughing, despite the stoicism of the rest of his expression. “I can complain and I will. Now shut up, suck it up, and scrub.”

Shortly after, Eren was left with his own devices, and a shitload of bleach. Not the way he imagined spending a beautiful, sunny day – but, on the other hand, cleaning would probably help keep his mind off the impending doom of returning home. He could concern himself with wiping away dust and sweeping floors.

With that in mind, Eren grabbed his iPod and got cleaning.

***

A loud knocking at the front door had Eren suspiciously approaching it and looking through the skinny window beside it.

Frowning, he opened the door to two women, seemingly around his age. One was petite and blonde, a pixie looking girl that was all big blue eyes. The other was a tan, freckled Amazon with a bored expression.

“Hi?” Eren said, “Can I help you?”

“Hey, there!” the blonde said. “I’m Christa and this is my girlfriend Ymir. We saw a car pull into the
house and since neither of us could remember ever seeing someone stay here, we thought we'd come over and say hi.”

“Oh,” Eren said, his expression brightening. “That's cool. Come on in. Sorry if I'm gross, I was doing an overhaul cleaning session on the place. It's been sitting in a lot of dirt.”

“Aw, what a cute place,” Christa said as she came in, taking Ymir's wrist to lead her along.

Eren followed them, saying, “Living room's on the right. So, do you guys live down here?”

“Oh, no, I wish. Most of the houses here are summer homes. The one we're staying in belongs to my parents. Is this yours and your... partner's?”

It suddenly occurred to Eren that these were the two girls he'd seen kissing. Which means, if he'd seen them, it was very totally absolutely possible that they'd see him and Levi. Whoops.

“Uh. Yes.”

“Aw, that's lovely,” Christa said enthusiastically, turning to beam at Eren. “I'll be honest. We mostly came over because we were hoping you'd come over to ours this evening for a barbeque. It's nice to make summer friends, don't you think?”

Ymir snorted. “Not everyone is as friendly as you, Christa. Give the guy a break.”

“Uh, ah, no no, I'd actually really like that,” Eren said, mirroring Christa's smile. Finally, normal human contact. “What time would you like us over?”

“Um,” Christa flicked a glance out the window. “Just around sunset work for you? We'll have a little bonfire and everything.”

“Wow, I like the sound of that. Should I bring anything?”

“Booze,” Ymir said, staring him down.

Eren made a mental note to text Levi. He grinned. “Check.”

They chatted for a little while longer, but Eren wanted to have his job done before Levi arrived, so he escorted the couple out. They were sweet - well, Christa was - and Eren was glad to meet someone who did all the work of befriending. Because, honestly, he was mostly crap at it.

He shot a text over to Levi.

*Buy enough alcohol for four people.*

*You planning on getting me drunk, kid? I'm no lightweight.*

*As if I would ever do something like that.*

*Levi.*

*Levi.*

*You buying it?*

*I'M FUCKING BUYING IT JESUS FUCKING CHRIST WHAT'RE YOU A TEENAGE GIRL TEXTING EVERY TWO SECONDS.*

...*You shouldn't swear at Jesus, Levi.*
Clean the house TWICE.

Damnit.
Heeeeey. Wow, a whole like three days in between updates! I'm lagging! ;) Anyway, thank you for all of your past comments, I hope you enjoy this chapter with Christa and Ymir.

Next chapter is going to be sexy and also the boys are heading home. The getting-to-know-you honeymoon comes to a close!

“What the hell are you talking about, Jaeger?” Levi said as he dropped the shopping bags on the kitchen counter.

“A barbecue,” Eren repeated. “With the neighbours two doors down.”

Levi just blinked at him, betraying nothing. “So, when you asked for alcohol for four people -”

“It was because I wanted alcohol for four people.” Eren cocked his head. “What did you think I wanted it for?”

“So, who the hell are these people, anyway?” Levi said as he made himself busy emptying the bags.

Eren took food as it shoved at him and deposited it into the open fridge. “Christa and Ymir. They're a couple who came around and asked if we wanted to go to theirs after sunset. I just thought it would be nice to socialise with people who aren't linked to demons and ghosts, y'know?”

Levi grunted and threw a loaf of bread at him. Eren caught it and frowned. “Did you... I mean, you wanted to be alone with me instead?”

“Like hell. I just hate people making decisions for me.”

Eren huffed a noise of annoyance. “That's fine. You can stay here and sit in the dark while I have a blast being a normal human being.”

“Is that what this is about?” Levi asked, not looking at him as took a large bowl from a high cupboard and put it in the sink. He dumped strawberries in it and ran cold water over them to soak. “You want to feel normal?”

Eren scowled and threw the loaf, hitting Levi squarely in the back of the head. “I am normal, you first class dickwad.”

Levi whirled, his eyes blade sharp. “In what world are you normal, Eren?” he said softly.

Eren felt his face burn. For one fucking day – even for an hour – he wanted to feel like he didn't have an immobile darkness breathing over his shoulder. He wanted to forget what it felt like putting his hands around someone's neck and yanking. He wanted to erase the memory of his mother's screams and his father asking him what he'd done to her.

Even if it was all a lie, wasn't that okay? Didn't people lie to themselves to feel safe?
“It’s a good thing you’re not a holy man anymore, Levi,” Eren snapped. “Because I’m sure you were shit at it.”

Turning on his heel, Eren marched from the room, grabbed his flip-flops at the back door and bolted. His eyes felt hot and wet, his breath coming fast as he kept his head down, clenched his teeth, and made for the dock. The sun was low in the sky, the waves a quiet murmur beneath the rickety boards that creaked beneath each of Eren’s heavy steps.

The sun was pregnant on the horizon of trees across the lake, and Eren had to squint to take in the molten gold waters. With a growl of frustration, he wiped the tears from his cheeks and cursed himself for acting like such a fucking kid.

Loneliness gripped Eren by the heart and clenched. He imagined that this was the end of the line for him and Levi. What was he thinking, hoping that Levi saw him as something more than someone who needed fixing? Someone who was more than these gifts – or, curse. They could be considered either way.

He didn’t know how long he sat there with the cool lake lapping at his ankles, but when he splashed his feet out in front of him, he could see his toes starting to prune. And the sun was beginning to disappear behind the thick fringe of forest. Eren took a long, calming breath and prepared himself to go next door alone. He’d have to sneak in and grab the alcohol, but it was very possible that Levi would just ignore him.

He was about to stand when soft, even footsteps sounded down the length of the dock. Eren’s entire body stiffened, and he didn’t have to turn to know who it was.

Levi dropped beside him gracefully. One bare foot dipped in the water and he bent his other leg, his painted toes curling around the rough edge of the dock. Levi rested his forearm on his knee and sighed.

“I’m good at a lot of things,” Levi said, and Eren rolled his eyes. Levi cleared his throat and said, “This isn’t one of them.”

“This, meaning human interaction?”

“Human interaction with people that I like.”

Eren snorted. “And you like me?”

Levi slid a dark look Eren’s way. “Don’t play stupid. It’s only cute when you don’t mean it.”

Eren’s mouth opened, then closed. He nodded. “You like me, but I’m a freak.”

With a gruff noise of frustration, Levi tilted his chin and looked to the sky, the splashes of pink and peach settling softly across his profile. “I didn’t mean it the way it sounded.”

“And what did you mean?”

“Isn’t it enough that I didn’t mean it?” Levi said tightly.

“Fuck no, it isn’t, Levi.”

Levi’s jaw twitched. “I’d meant that... You’re special, Jaeger. Before your abilities and after – with or without them, you have no chance of being average. That’s who you’ll always be, and you shouldn’t be a fucking idiot and try to change that.”
Eren openly stared at Levi, his cheeks flushed and his eyes wide. A deep frown marred Levi’s features – he looked more uncomfortable with this conversation than Eren had ever seen him.

“Well,” Eren said, his voice waveri, “That's great and all. But what does all of that have to do with me wanting a normal night out with some neighbours?”

“It doesn't,” Levi said from between clenched teeth. “You were right.”

“About?”

“About what you said in the kitchen.”

Eren blinked, and when it hit him, his face lit up with a grin. “You wanted to spend time alone with me.”

Levi's stubborn, icy silence was answer as any.


“Have a mentioned lately that you're a manipulative little shit?” Levi said, his voice husky.

“Yeah. I don’t mind.”

Eren rested his head on Levi's shoulder and looked out at the lake. A deep sense of calm had washed over him. He felt as if he'd come up for air for the first time in hours, and he was finally free of the weight above his head.

“So,” Levi said softly, “Are we going to do this thing or not?”

“We – really?”

Levi groaned and got to his feet, taking Eren's hand and yanking him up along.

“Let's go before I change my mind.”

“Hey, Levi?” Eren lightly swung their hands as they walked away from the sunset.

“What, brat?”

“I'm sorry about what I said. I was just pissed off and -”

“It's fine. I didn't think I was particularly good at it either. S'why I quit.”

Eren stopped as their feet touched grass. He turned to Levi with a frown, but saw no sadness or regret in Levi's expression.

“When will you tell me about it?” Eren said.

Levi searched Eren's face, and his only reply was, “Later.”

***

“You're here!” Christa said, beaming as she answered the door.

“Hey.” Eren smiled and gestured with the heavy bag of beers to Levi. “This is Levi. Levi, this is Christa. He bought the beer and I've just looked at it – it's the good stuff.”
“Hi,” Levi said, not sounding unfriendly, at least in that single syllable. The night was young, though.

Christa laughed and stepped back so they could file in. “You didn't have to get anything major, but I know Ymir will appreciate it, so thank you. Come on, everything's ready out the back.”

They followed, and Eren bit down on a smile as he watched Levi stare balefully at all the pink, cream, and white decorating throughout the house.

The back porch was strung up in tiny, twinkling fairy lights. On a round table were a set of tealight candles, but Eren caught the citronella smell and recognised them as mosquito repellent ones. On the ground, plugged into the outdoor socket on the side of the house, was an iPod player, and something with folky guitar and an honest man's voice played.

_Tried absolution of the mind and soul, it only led me where I should not go. Oh and the answer, well how could I miss – something as simple as this? Something as simple as this._

Eren smiled at Levi's back as he watched Christa motion for him to come down the steps of he porch and greet Ymir, who stood by the grill, brandishing tongs like a weapon.

_I've been falling, crashing, breaking. All the while, you stood there waiting._

Realising that he should probably put the drinks in the fridge to cool, Eren backed up and popped into the house, heading for the kitchen. He spotted an old, fat spaniel dog lying on the floor in front of the fridge and smiled.

“Hey boy, I kinda need to get in there, okay?”

The dog eyed him dismally for a moment, but eventually rolled and got to his feet. His nails lightly tapped on the tile as he wandered away.

“Cute,” Eren said to himself. He'd never had a pet, but he'd always wanted one.

After he'd emptied the beers – and wine, there was wine. _Christ_, Levi had really been intent on them two getting drunk tonight. Eren kind of felt bad that Levi had misinterpreted his texts – and at the same time, he was glad to be here. Glad to feel _free_, if just for a short while.

When Eren came back out, he knew immediately from the stubborn jut of Levi's chin, and the way his shoulders sat stiff and tense that he did not like Ymir.

Christa looked to the porch with pleading eyes and jerked her head. Eren took the clear signal and made a beeline for Levi.

“Ymir, hey. How's it going?” Unconsciously, Eren brought his arm around Levi's waist and pulled him flush to his side, simply hoping to calm his fighting stance.

“Yeah, s'alright for now. Alex, right?”

“Yeah, that's what I meant.”

“What kind of name is Ymir?”

Ymir pursed her lips and flipped the marinated, lightly blackened chicken on the grill. “It's Norse. It means giant, basically. My parents had only picked a boy's name, and when I came along, they stuck
me with it, anyway.”

“It suits you,” Levi said brittley.

Eren aimed a warning look his way and received daggers in response.

“So, Eren, Levi,” Christa said brightly, tossing her long bangs from her face as she smiled. “What do you two do for a living?”

Eren froze up, and he could feel his entire face going up in flame, only dimly hearing Levi pronounce that he worked within a branch of the Catholic church.

Ymir was smirking a Eren’s face. She clacked her tongs at him. “What's with the face? You a stripper or something?”

Eren bristled as both Ymir and Levi snorted. “Um, no, no I'm fucking not.”

“Oh my god,” Ymir said, her smile widening. “You are adorable. So cute. You could pass for a lesbian, you know.” She narrowed her eyes and cocked her head, “Are you -”

“I'm not a girl! Jesus, why would you think -”

“The eyes,” Levi said, nodding soberly.

Ymir shrugged and nodded in agreement. “Totes. And the hair.”

“Your blush is very cute, Eren,” Christa said unhelpfully.

Did Eren actually have a target on his forehead? Why was this his life? Had he gone from being a violent, basketcase teenager to a pushover adult?

“I'm – I need a drink now, actually.”

Eren put his everything into not physically running for the back door.

“Hey, wait!” It was Christa. She stopped him on the porch. “I'm sorry. I hope we didn't hurt your feelings.”

Eren waved it off with one hand and managed to curve his lips. “It's cool. I'm getting used to it.”

“You don't actually look like a girl, you know. You're very handsome and you're, uh, body is...”

“Don't hurt yourself,” Eren said, outright laughing at the distress painted across Christa's face. “Seriously, though, don't worry. I've got a pretty thick skin. And I'm just happy to be here.”

Christa's eyes brightened in the candle light. “Really? Oh, Eren, me too! I know we haven't known each other yet, but it's just nice to meet new people and shake things up, isn't it?”

“You have no idea.” They smiled at each other for a moment, before Eren said, “Oh! So, what's your dog’s name?”

Christa frowned. “My dog?”

“Yeah. Inside?”

“I... don't have a dog.”

Christa's eyes went round and she took a step back. “What?”

“You... you don't have a dog. Okay, maybe we should check it out. He probably wandered in when…”

“That's my dog,” Christa whispered. “But he died when I was ten years old, Eren.”

Christa's words slapped Eren in the face. He felt faint. “Heh. Uh. Um. I just – I must be mistaken th-”

“What the heck? You can't just say something like that and drop it. How did you know about my dog? Did you see a photo of him or something? I don't think I have any put up downstairs.”

“Christa.” Eren held up his hands in a gesture of peace. “Let me just – I mean... Ugh. So, for a living... what I do, I mean. I'm a medium.”

Christa stared at him blankly. She laughed, short and panicked. “You're joking, right?”

“I kind of wish I was. But no. I'm a medium. I... Sometimes I have difficulties separating one thing from the other.” Eren paused, searching for a reaction. This was the first person who he'd really come out to in this way, and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to go about it. Eren sighed. “I'm sorry if I freaked you out about your dead ghost dog.”

“No.” Christa pressed her lips together and shook her head. “No, it's okay. I believe in all that stuff, anyway, y'know? And it's nice hearing that he's still here with me, after all of this time.”

“Yeah.” Eren awkwardly rubbed a hand down his arm. “I'll go get that drink. Should I get some for everyone?”

“Definitely,” Christa said, her smile just a little anxious. “I know I'll need it. And the way Ymir and Levi are getting along – or not – I think we'll all need it.”

“Oh yeah, by the way – what happened there?”

“A short joke,” Christa said with a sigh. “Right off the bat.”

“Shit.”

“Yes. Well, anyway, I think Levi is lovely.”

“Yeah?” Eren grinned. “Me too. But don't tell him I said that.”

They were both chuckling to themselves as they broke off, Eren heading into the kitchen for the drinks. When he passed the dog on the couch, Eren muttered, “I'm on to you, buddy.”

***

Christa had seemed to bounce back, and Eren had breathed a sigh of relief as everyone piled around the table with platters of chicken, potato salad, and heaps of bread and butter. The food was simple, straight forward, and delicious. Eren felt like he could eat this for days.

Everyone already seemed on their way to a buzz, and Eren remembered that the last time he'd drank, he'd danced like an absolute idiot in front of Levi. When he looked to Levi, Eren found him staring
back, and he had the distinct feeling Levi was wondering what nonsense this night would bring.

Dinner was way more boisterous than Eren had imagined it would be. Ymir had a laugh like a wrecking ball, filling up the entire space and echoing across the lake. Christa always filled the silence with her chatter, and seemed genuinely interested in the questions she asked Eren and Levi. Eren filled in the spaces as well as he could, and Levi mostly looked on, although he didn't seem to be displeased with the company, which Eren took as a win.

Once dinner was finished, Eren offered to clear the plates and Levi tagged along. They stood side by side in the tiny kitchen, arms brushing as Levi washed and Eren dried.

“So, I saw a ghost dog tonight,” Eren said conversationally.

Levi dropped the plate he was holding and it splashed in the water, splattering soap on the both of them. “What?”

“Yeah, so I guess animals can be spirits, too,” Eren said, ignoring Levi's stare. “I mean, I guess maybe he imprinted on his place and he's just happy to be around the energy of his family. I dunno.” Eren laughed and bumped Levi's shoulder. “Don't look at me like that, I have no idea what I'm doing. It's all a guessing game.”

Levi paused, nodded, and picked up the fallen dish to rewash it. “I trust your intuition.”

Eren blinked down at the glass he was drying, something foreign and not altogether unpleasant shifting in his chest. Before he could overthink it, Eren turned just enough to dip his head down and capture Levi's mouth in a slow, lingering kiss.

Levi dropped the plate again.

***

“Anybody know a good ghost story?” Ymir said as they all huddled around the crackling bonfire.

It was just cool enough that Christa was drowning in an oversized hoodie and had tugged leggings on along with her summer dress. She looked young, like a highschooler. Ymir was made of tougher stuff and seemed content in her flannel shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, and long jean cut-offs.

Eren had been the least dressed of them all, still hanging out in Hanji's clothes. Him and Levi shared a light flannel blanket, each of them holding one end and wrapping it around themselves. Eren almost felt like – well, he did feel like he was part of an actual couple. It was a weird feeling, but not unwelcome at all. He just didn't know how to handle it, since Levi actually seemed one-hundred percent chill about the entire thing.

Upon Ymir's request, Eren and Levi exchanged glances.

“Nope,” Levi said casually.

“Eren?” Christa said, her tone imploring and setting him on edge. “You must have something to share.”

“I – um, nothing entertaining.”

Christa looked to Ymir and said in a stage whisper, “Eren's a medium.”

“A what?” Ymir hooted with laughter, smacking her leg. “Bullshit. I call total bullshit. Where the
“hell did you hear that?”

“It’s – it’s okay,” Eren said with a short laugh. “I don’t need to prove it or anything.”

“Oh no, now you've got to.” Ymir sat up from her slouch and leaned in, her eyes terrifyingly bright in the firelight. “Do something.”


Levi fixed Ymir with an unwavering gaze. “He doesn't have to prove shit to you or anyone. Drop it.”

“Like hell. You guys scam artists or something? You go around tricking people who have lost loved ones and talking about how their Great Aunt Sally is sending them a message to stay in school and don't do drugs?”

“How would we scam you if you were the one who came to our house, idiot,” Levi said flatly.

“Hey, guys,” Eren said, flicking his attention between Christa's concerned expression and Levi's cold one. He had to defuse this. “Okay, yeah, sure, I'll do something. Whatever.”

Inside the shared cocoon of their blanket, Levi squeezed Eren's knee. “Eren.”

“It's fine. Doing it is easier than not doing it, in this kind of situation.”

He just... had to figure out how to do things. It wasn't like he tended to search out this shit. He did the thing with Isabel's grave, but that felt like low level stuff in comparison to calling someone out. On top of that, what if he ended up encountering someone or something dangerous, and it put these two new friends into harm's way?

Shit, why had he agreed to this again? Oh yeah, because his new life's mission in the past years had been to do things in a way that would make him friends.

Eren was learning that friends were a hell of a hassle.

Taking a breath, Eren stood. “Okay. Um, Christa? Can I hold your hand?”

“Yes you're not a lesbian in disguise?” Ymir muttered.

Eren ignored her and held out his hand. Christa stood and laid her palm atop his.

“Why aren't you doing me?” Ymir said.

“You have bad energy,” Eren said immediately, and barely knew where that came from. The only thing he knew was that it was true. Whatever skeletons Ymir had in her closet, Eren didn't want to meet their ghosts.

Letting his eyes fall shut, Eren concentrated on the warmth of Christa's skin, the light weight of her hand in his palm. He recalled what Armin's positive, glowing energy had felt like, and how it had buzzed in the air like a living thing. That's what he wanted to draw towards himself. That's what he wanted to draw in to -

Something rammed his back, like a fish violently reeled in from the water. Eren popped his eyes open and whirled around, ignoring the muddled questions in his ears from Ymir and Christa.

Because Eren was looking directly at another Christa. He blinked – she remained. He looked over
his shoulder – she was there, too. The only difference was their clothing. Their clothing and their
expression, because this other Christa looked infinitely sadder.

“I -” Eren swallowed and continued to stare. “Who are you?”

Not-Christa just met his gaze evenly, her head cocked just so.

“Eren?” Christa said, “Who’re you talking to? Are you joking around?”


“I – what? Is that a name?”

“She hasn’t let me go,” Historia said – and suddenly she was inches from his face, causing him to
jump half-way out of his skin. With wide, vacant eyes, Historia peered around Eren's shoulder and
whispered, “She won't let go. I can't leave. Please, please let me go.”

“Who, Christa?” Eren said, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“Eren, this isn't funny, who're you -”

“Tell her I can't go on like this. I hate this place. I hate this pain.”

“Who are you, though?”

Historia leaned in, her voice almost inaudible. But Eren caught it all the same.

He sucked in a breath and turned to face Christa. She looked white as a sheet and Ymir had stood to
wrap her arms around her from behind.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, man?” Ymir said, baring her teeth in fury. “You think you can
just -”

“Your twin sister,” Eren said hollowly. “Historia. She says you need to let go already. That it's
causing her pain and she can't move on until you let go.”

Christa stared vacantly ahead, her eyes glistening. “Wha...” she said faintly, her voice breathless.

“Hist...oria? Are you – you're not -”

“I'm not making this up,” Eren snapped, growing grouchy from having to defend himself. He was
already performing on command, which he wasn't altogether happy about. But, on the other hand, he
was helping someone... he hoped.

A hand cupped over Eren's ear and Historia whispered against his skin like a cold wind. Eren
shivered and looked at Levi, just for the comfort of his face. His expression was solemn, his attention
wholly on Eren. He looked poised to jump.

Eren breathed a soft sigh through his nose. “She says she loves you, but she's gone now and she
wants to cross over. She's stuck to you through your bond, and because you won't fully
acknowledge her death, she can't pass over. And Christa?” Eren said with as much gravity as he
could, “I promise you this. The other side – this limbo – they all hate it. So take your sister's advice
and let her go.”

For one long moment, Christa gaped at him, silent tears trailing black mascara streams down her
pale cheeks. Then, as if the strings above her had been cut, she collapsed to her knees with a gut
wrenching sob. Ymir crouched, her arms wrapped around Christa as she looked to Eren, her
expression livid.

“What the fuck have you done? If I weren't down here with her I'd tear you limb from fucking limb.”

“Try it,” Levi said, already standing at Eren's side in the matter of seconds.

“Try and stop me, midget.” Ymir was getting to her feet when Christa gripped her wrist.

“No! No, Ymir. I – this is, this is what I needed to hear. Haven't you told me the same thing a hundred times?”

“Yeah, but I love you. This guy? This guy is just -”

“Trying to help,” Levi cut though the conversation like a knife. “He was requested to perform a trick like some fucking sideshow freak and when he did it, you weren't happy with the results. Deal with the consequences of your actions or don't fucking act. Jeager?” He shot Eren a look.

“Uh. Levi?”

“We're leaving.”

Levi laced his fingers with Eren's and pulled him along, as if he were taking a child to time out.

“Hey, wait! But Christa and – and, uh, Historia and -”

“Fuck 'em,” Levi said under his breath, his voice taut with an anger that Eren couldn't quite understand. “You didn't need that shit. They asked, you said no, they begged, you gave in because you're a soft-hearted pussy, and now they're crying because they got what they wanted. I hate people like that.”

Levi had just dragged Eren right across the back lawn of the neighbours, and into their own yard.

“B-but, Levi, I'm sure they didn't realise how it was gonna go. I mean I never know how it's going to -”

“Which is why you shouldn't be doing it in the first place, either. Not until you understand yourself better.”

“Yeah, well,” Eren muttered, “practice makes perfect.”

Levi made a displeased noise and yanked open the back door, pushing Eren into the living room.

Eren frowned as he followed Levi into the kitchen. “I don't feel right leaving Christa after all of that. She's obviously in a lot of pain about whatever happened to her sister, and I just dropped the bomb and walked away.”

“Don't baby her,” Levi said as he opened the fridge and took out two beers. He tossed one to Eren, who fumbled it, but didn't let it fall. “Her own dead sister was trying to give it to her straight. She needed to hear it.”

“Doesn't make it any less sad,” Eren said as he looked down and cracked his beer open. “Tomorrow, before we leave... I'm gonna go see if she's alright.”

Levi rolled his eyes and took a long, deep drink from the can. He set the can on the counter and said, “Of course you are.”
“What, you think it's stupid to care?” Eren snapped.

“No, you fuckwit, I mean of course you are because you care about everyone first, before yourself.”

“I – oh. Okay.” Eren took a tentative sip of his beer, recognising that his body was fighting against a good buzz. “I mean, I wasn't always that way.”

Levi raised an eyebrow and walked up to Eren until they were nearly toe to toe. “I find that difficult to believe.”

“Well, believe it. I've always been a selfish asshole. I'm just working on it.”

“Or maybe you were always who you are now, but your circumstances made you a selfish asshole, and now you're working your way backwards.”

Taken aback, Eren frowned down at Levi. “Huh. I dunno.”

“You're all guns blazing and confidence until it comes to yourself. Idiot.” But the last word was spoken softly, almost as an endearment while Levi slung his arms around Eren's neck.

Eren set his beer aside in favour of resting his hands on Levi's narrow hips. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Now who's trying to play psychologist?”

“No idea. Who?”

Eren couldn't help but smile. He wondered who else had been allowed to see this slightly playful, a little more openly caring Levi. Although, Eren would be happy if no one had ever seen it and he had this all to himself. But he also knew a delusion when he saw one.

“So...” Eren rested his forehead against Levi's, their lips a whisper apart. “My whole socialisation plan failed miserably.”

“Never bring a ghost to a party. Rule number one.”

“Ah, I missed that memo.”

Levi tilted his chin, his eyes hooded. “I'll email it to you.”

“You do that,” Eren murmured, and closed the distance between them with his mouth. He kissed Levi once, twice, then pulled back enough to meet his foggy gaze. “Bed?”

“If you mean to sleep, I'll kill you while you dream.”

“Eh,” Eren said with a shrug, biting back a smile. “We'll see how I feel when we get there.”

“Officially plotting your death, now.”

“Well, at least you're thinking of me.”

“Eren?”

“Yeah?”

“Bed.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

This chapter is just basically a glorified sex scene, but whatever.

Lakehouse Honeymoon mini arc ends at this chapter, haha.

SO! Keep an eye out for those extra scenes, as after this chapter I'll have hit 10k Hits and I shall be posting them!

I'm SO SO SORRY I haven't replied to comments this time around. I am a mega shit. This week my baby has been unwell and was kind enough to get me sick at the same time as her, and it was all just a big disaster. So, late chapter and no replies to comments, BOOOOOO. This time around, though, I am at your service!

Anyway, I hope you enjoy.

PS Humour somehow snuck into my sex scene. I'M SORRY, I CAN'T HELP MYSELF.

Between rushed, desperate kisses and frantic, roaming hands, Eren and Levi's shirts had been yanked off and abandoned down the hall. Shoes were kicked away in their wake, and when Levi slammed Eren against the bedroom door, his thumbs were already hooking in the waistband of Eren's shorts and sliding them down the jut of his hips.

“Eren,” Levi said roughly, his sharp, black gaze pinning Eren against the door.

Eren swallowed hard, his breath shuddering out as he recalled the frantic morning, almost entirely under the blankets, with their boxers still on. They didn't know each other's bodies, yet – not by a long shot. And fuck, did Eren want to know.

A fire burned within Eren, and the person wedging his leg between Eren's thighs was the catalyst. With a guttural noise that Eren barely recognised as his own, Eren wound his arms around Levi's waist and yanked him in. His tongue delved between Levi's lips, desperate to consume every flavour, every feel of that sinful, sarcastic mouth. Levi met each lance and curl of Eren's tongue with his own; his hot, wet kisses just as fierce as Eren's.

Fumbling fingers worked frantically at Levi's fly, Eren's nerves fraying and frying as Levi dug blunt nails into Eren's bare shoulder and attacked his mouth like he was on a murder mission. Eren was half-convinced that the sound of Levi panting Eren's name against his mouth was enough to kill him.

Eren grunted in frustration as he yanked at Levi's jeans, bringing them half way down his hips. “You fuckin' glued these on? These skinny jeans are too damn skinny.”

A short, rough laugh huffed against Eren's ear. “Go big or go home, Jaeger.”

“Jesus.”

Eren dropped hard to his knees, both out of weakness and desperation, the sting shooting up his
thighs utterly welcome. His fingertips scraped over white hips as he tugged hard on Levi's jeans and clumsily wiggled them downwards. He was only distantly aware of Levi muttering something about his “stupid hair” while undoing ponytail and letting his hair down. Levi's fingers dove in and gripped Eren's crown tightly, but Eren was barely conscious of the prickling along his scalp.

All Eren wanted was the weight of Levi's hard, heavy dick in his mouth. All he wanted was that salty-slick taste and Levi's thighs trembling beneath his palms.

So when Eren had finally peeled those nightmarish jeans down Levi's thighs, Eren's mind went blissfully blank as he closed his lips around the head of Levi's cock. He heard a hiss, and Eren couldn't fight his own muffled moan as he slid his mouth as far down the faintly pulsing dick as he could manage. With his eyes watering from the force at which he plunged his mouth along Levi's cock, Eren firmly gripped the base and lapped from his fingers up to the leaking tip, flicking the peak of his tongue over the tight bundle of nerves beneath the head.

Levi's breath hitched, his entire body visibly tensing as he grit out, “Eren, you're – christ, get the fuck up here. I'm gonna -” Levi sucked in a sharp breath as Eren swallowed him to the hilt and nearly gagged. “You little shit. Gonna fuck you through the floor.”

Eren groaned around Levi's dick, the vibrations of his throat shuddering along to Levi and earning him the faintest whimper and fingertips scraping through Eren's hair. Gliding his swollen lips from Levi's cock and pressing a sloppy, wet kiss to the tip, Eren looked up at Levi with his lips parted, struggling for breath.

A slow smirk spread across Eren's humming mouth. Levi had never looked so wrecked. His forehead was pressed against the door, his body arched over Eren like some avenging angel, his eyes black and his sharp cheekbones bright red. He looked at Eren like he wasn't sure if he wanted to fuck or murder him.

Bowing is head, Eren's cheek purposefully brushing Levi's stiff, straining dick, Eren worked at Levi's jeans, his hand stroking down the soft back of Levi's knee as he coaxed Levi's feet from the taut material. Before he could stand himself, Levi's hands fist in Eren's hair and tugged hard. Eren yelped and came up, blinking hazily at Levi's face as he was shoved up against the door. The wood was frigid against his shoulders, while the mouth that dove in and captured Eren's was moist and sweltering.

“Hey,” Eren gasped against Levi's lips, murmuring a noise of appreciation as Levi dragged a bruising hand down his hip and sneaked his hand into his shorts to palm his throbbing cock. “Levi?”

Levi's reply was a grunt as he moved onto Eren's throat and shoulder, nipping and sucking as if he were more involved with sating his own appetite than concerning himself with Eren's pleasure. But every scrape of teeth and stinging bite went straight to Eren's dick and scattered his thoughts like bloody casualties.


Levi snapped his head up, his eyes wide and his pupils swollen. Then, of all things, he grinned like a predator who had just found the most delicious prey imaginable. “Perfect.”

Eren gulped, blinking owlishly as Levi quickly moved to yank Eren's shorts to his feet. “Um, what does – what does that mean?”

“Fuck,” Levi said with a long exhale as he stared between them. “Didn't realise you were so –
“Size queen?” Eren asked, hiding his embarrassment by slinging his arms around Levi’s shoulders and hiding his face against his throat. Despite Levi’s even tone, his pulse was like a jackhammer.

“Shut up.”

And just like that, Levi reached past Eren and turned the doorknob, promptly shoving him back and back until his calves hit the bed.

Everything felt sped up and in slow motion at the same time. Eren couldn’t touch enough, couldn’t be touched enough. Everything felt new as Levi pressed him into the mattress with that powerful, compact body and those commanding hands.

Eren couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled up when he took Levi by surprise, hooking a leg around Levi’s knee and effectively flipped their positions. Levi looked up at him in muted shock, that was quickly replaced with a yelp as Eren scooted down his body and bit at that delicious wing of hip bone.

Huffing a soft laugh against Levi’s stomach, Eren brushed his nose against his happy trail and said, “Ticklish?”

“I’ll fucking end you, brat.” But there was a surprising ring of humour in Levi’s voice as he shimmied out from underneath Eren and rolled to his side to rummage in a side table.

Eren swallowed nervously. He’d been serious about the whole bottoming thing. It wasn’t like his other few partners hadn’t fingered him and stuff, but he’d always ended up being the aggressor in the relationship. Now, with Levi, he felt almost on equal ground as him, most of the time. So this was all kinds of fresh and terrifying and exciting, all in one.

“Lay back,” Levi said lowly, his tone all smooth, midnight confidence. Without a second thought, Eren did as he was told, leaning back against the pillows. Before he had a second to feel nervous, Levi was above him, hands flat against the mattress on either side of Eren's head. Eren's mouth opened in question, but was silenced by a slow, deep kiss that had Eren nerves setting alight and his hands fisting in the sheets. Levi plundered his mouth, taking full command of every chill and zing that swept through Eren's prone body.

When they finally parted, Eren could only silently stare up at Levi, completely and utterly starstruck. “Levi, I -”

“You talk too much.” With that, Levi drew back to kneel between Eren's thighs.

Eren shut his eyes when he heard Levi messing with the lube, and just held his breath. Surprise struck him in the chest once more, as Levi gently took Eren's foot and propped it atop Levi's shoulder. He turned and pressed a warm kiss to Eren's ankle. Eren's mouth opened in question, but was silenced by a slow, deep kiss that had Eren nerves setting alight and his hands fisting in the sheets. Levi plundered his mouth, taking full command of every chill and zing that swept through Eren's prone body.

The noise Eren made was probably something only dog should have heard. Eren felt his entire face burn, as even he hadn't expected his own reaction. He flung an arm over his his eyes and canted his hips up to allow Levi a better angle.

“Fuckin' shameless, aren't you?” Levi murmured, his words not nearly as steady as they had been moments ago.
“I told you it had been a while!” Eren said from between his teeth. “Just fuck me, alright?”

Levi sucked in a sharp breath, and it was all oblivion after that. Eren was at the mercy of Levi’s clever fingers, unable to even tame the breathy moans that broke past his lips as he was spread and stretched further. The passing time became fiery and fluid, pooling in Eren’s stomach and prickling with sweat at the small of his back. If, by the end, he was writhing against Levi’s wet, pumping fingers like an animal in heat, he was barely aware of it.

“Shit, Eren, I need to fuck you now,” Levi said, his mouth pressed against Eren’s knee, his arm wrapped around Eren’s shivering thigh while his free hand worked Eren open wide and raw.

“Yes yes yes, what the hell’re you waiting for?” Eren whimpered and swung his other foot over Levi’s shoulder, using the power of his legs to pull Levi in until Eren’s knees were hooked over Levi’s shoulders.

“Fuckin’ – why didn't you tell me sooner?” Levi snapped, removing his fingers so quickly that Eren actually made a noise like he was going to cry.

“Asshole, what did you th-” Eren looked up at Levi, watching as he ripped open a condom wrapper with his teeth, and Eren swore his eyes crossed just from that vision alone. He wasn't sure if he was in heaven or hell, and the decision wasn’t made any easier when Levi pressed the head of his dick against Eren's ass.

Oh shit, that was too big. Way too big. That was never going to fit in a million y-

Eren’s moan was twinned by Levi’s own as he pushed past that first tight barrier, Levi’s fingertips digging into Eren's hips.

“Wait wait wait,” Eren said breathlessly, one of his knees moving away from Levi’s shoulder in order to smack his foot directly on Levi’s chest.

Levi looked down at the foot on his chest, then at Eren with might have been the world’s most murderous expression. “Eren. I’m in you.”

Eren whimpered. “But -”

Levi pushed in a little further, his shoulders tensing with the obvious strength he was exerting on pure self-control. Almost immediately, the friction inside Eren became too much and he dropped his foot – in the same instant, Levi took Eren by the hips, yanked him back, and plunged in deep.

Pain was a distant memory as Eren flung his arms over his head, his hands scrabbling for the headboard – and, finding none, grappled in the pillows. Levi’s heaving chest was pressed hot and flush against the back of Eren's thighs, the back of his knees growing slick with sweat and continuously slipping off of Levi’s shoulders as he thrust into him with measured, even strokes.


The growl that rumbled from Levi's chest shook Eren to the core, so much so that when Levi lunged forward and took Eren's mouth, bringing Eren's knees practically to his ears, Eren could do nothing but fall in line. Suddenly there was nothing systematic about Levi's movements as he frantically fucked Eren into the mattress like they were going to break through the bed.

“Shameless,” Levi rasped against Eren's mouth, plunging his tongue between Eren's lips and devouring him in hot, wet bites. His hand slipped between their damp bodies and wrapped around
Eren's dick. “Perfect.”

Eren whimpered and bit down on Levi's bottom lip, then laved the swollen spot better with a lick. Levi's hand was working his cock too fast, too much, demanding everything from Eren, whether or not he could give it. A burning coil of tension was tightening inside him, something that Eren recognise as not just sexual, but something else altogether. He gasped against Levi's mouth, his back arching up, his body welcoming every slap of Levi's hips, every unbearably full plunge of his cock.

“Levi, I'm gonna -”

Eren shuddered beneath Levi's body, spilling hot and hard over his hand and sticking between them. Burying his face in Levi's shoulder and raking his nails up Levi's back, Eren rode out the stars behind his eyelids, and yelped as he felt Levi's cock twitch and pulse within him. Levi breathed a strangled little sigh in Eren's ear and dropped his forehead on the pillow beside Eren's head.

However long they laid there in sweaty filth, their breathing calming to something even and normal, Eren had no idea. He was on cloud-fucking-nine and how the hell could he have thought bottoming was unpleasant? Obviously his past fuck buddy hadn't been particularly skilled in that area. But Levi. Levi. Jesus fucking Christ.

“How did you do that?” Eren found himself saying.

Levi was still face-down on top of him. “What.”

“I – everything?”

“Must be like riding a bike.”

“Am I a bicycle in this scenario?” Eren said with a sleepy smile.

“Yeah.”

Eren trailed his fingertips down the strong, lean lines of Levi's back, quietly pleased when Levi arched into the touch like a cat. “Um.”

“What ridiculous question you gonna ask now?” Levi said, his voice muffled by the pillows.

“I was just wondering... when the last time... y'know.”

“Since before I became a priest, obviously.”

“What?” Eren sprang up in bed, sending Levi flying off the end of the bed. “Oh god, oh god, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Levi!” Eren said, scrambling to the edge of the mattress, biting back his laughter as much as he could.

Levi popped up from the edge, grabbed Eren around the neck in some kind of freakish jiu-jitsu move and yanked him onto the hard floor with a resounding thud.

“You shitty brat,” Levi said, releasing his choke hold in favour of pining Eren to the ground. His glare was bright and his cheeks flushed with Eren could only imagine was embarrassment. “I don't even have the condom off and you're fucking throwing me out of the bed?”

“I – I was just, um, shocked? Because I can't imagine you not having sex for that long,” Eren said plainly, feeling his own cheeks crackle with heat beneath Levi's intense scrutiny. “I mean, I guess it makes sense now that I think of it. But you – with me – that's a long dry spell to break on someone
Levi's eyebrow angled sharply. “Someone like you?”

Eren looked away, unable to meet Levi's eyes. He cracked a smile. “Nothing. Just, I'm an idiot and I'm pretty sure you could find -”

Levi's mouth closed over Eren's, silencing him with lips alone; no teeth, no tongue. Their kiss held indefinitely, Levi's hand discovering Eren's as their fingers entwined beside Eren's ear. When they finally parted, Eren was dizzy enough that he could barely open his eyes. His lashes fluttered as he finally held Levi's gaze.

“Shower,” Levi said shortly, as if the previous conversation hadn't happened. “This is gross.”

Willing to roll with it, Eren snorted. “Are you going to call it gross every time we have sex?”

“Probably,” Levi said, sitting up and busying himself with sliding off the condom.

“Well, you don't seem to think it's very gross in the middle of it all.”

Levi looked up, locked eyes with Eren. “You make me forget.”

Eren felt like a deer in the headlights, so he concentrated on standing on wobbly legs. “Jesus, I can't believe I can walk.”

“You're flexible. You'll survive.”

“Pervert.”

“You bet your fucked ass I am.”

“Levi!”

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“All who go to her cannot return,” the sultry, deep female voice murmured in Eren's ear, “and find again the paths of life.”

Eren shot up in bed in a cold sweat, his hand blindly smacking the bedside table where his phone lay. He picked it up and fumbled out a text message to himself of the words he'd heard. He would be smarter than his dreams, dammit. He'd find a way.

Levi, who apparently slept like a stone, didn't stir from his star-fished, face down position. Smiling softly, Eren rested a hand in Levi’s hair, content to relax himself with the silky strands between his fingers. Such fine, delicate hair for someone so tough.

Although, every day Eren was beginning to see further past that exterior. There was so much more to him than the thug and the broken exorcist. There was something soft and needy, same as with any person. Levi just hid it better than most.

Knowing that he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep after a dream like that – nor did he want to – Eren rolled from bed and decide to make pancakes. They could stay warm in the oven until Levi awoke.

Standing and stretching his arms up, Eren meandered towards the window and looked out over the lake. The sun was peeking above the horizon, coaxing deep blue to warm, hazy grey. A frown
marred Eren's features as he recalled that this would be the evening he laid out everything for Levi, Father Erwin, and Hanji. He had to make the most of this morning, because he had no idea how shit would go down at the end of the day.

Feeling determined to put the negativity from his mind for now, Eren went to the laundry room, where his jeans were in the drier. He tugged them on, opting to go shirtless, as the air conditioning was off, and the morning temperature was beautiful. He wandered into the kitchen, opening the window and flicking on the radio to the first pop station he could find.

Humming under his breath, Eren set the coffee to brew and went about gathering the ingredients for his pancakes. The first few pancakes he made were duds, as they always were. So it was while one perfect pancake was puffing up on the pan and he was shoving a destroyed pancake in his mouth that, from behind, Levi said, “Charming.”

Eren looked over his shoulder, glaring even as he shoved the rest of the pancake in his mouth. “What are you looking at?”

Levi raised his eyebrows, his expression placid as he made a beeline for the coffee pot. “Nothing.”

“Uh huh,” Eren said as he swallowed. “Don't judge, they're delicious. Pour me coffee?”

Eren worked at flipping the pancake, biting back a smile as Levi came up beside him and nudged the hot mug against his arm. “You trying to burn me?”

“Keeping you in line.”

“I'm already in line. I'm cooking for you and everything. Tyrant.” Eren took the cup from Levi and leaned in to kiss him square on the mouth, pulling back with his lips curved.

It was to Eren's surprise that Levi wrapped a warm hand around the nape of his neck and drew him close, for a deeper kiss. With slow, morning laziness, Levi explored Eren's mouth, his tongue tasting of the sharp shock of coffee and his own clean, earthy flavour. Eren sighed against Levi’s lips, opening for him with everything he head, dropping into the kiss like it was both their first and their last.

When Eren smelled burning, he snapped back with a muttered, “shit,” and rushed to rescue his pancake. “This is your fault,” he said under his breath, glad his back was to Levi so that his red face could hide in secret.

“Worth it,” Levi said.

Eren's ribcage ached in a way that was starting to become common with Levi. Like Levi had Eren's heart in his fist, and every once in a while he'd give it a squeeze to remind Eren who was holding on. Eren wondered if Levi knew. Hell, Eren wondered if he'd even been aware until now.

Well, as long as only Eren knew, he was safe.

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“You,” was all Ymir said as she answered the door to a sheepish Eren.

“Me. Um, I just wanted to see if Christa was okay?”

“She's fine,” Ymir said curtly, looking down at Eren, despite them being basically the same height.
“That's – that's good.” Eren rolled a tense shoulder and met Ymir's eyes. “Look, I wasn't trying to start trouble or anything. And -”

“Your tiny boyfriend was right,” Ymir said quickly, huffing out a frustrated breath as she leaned in the open doorway. “I basically dared you because I thought you were full of shit and I got pissed when you weren't. So, yeah.”

Eren was fairly sure that, as far as apologies went, that was as much as Ymir could manage. Which was fine by him. “As long as everything's cool now. You sure Christa's fine?”

“Yeah. She's still sleeping. She's shaken, but I think... it was probably for the best. She took her sister's death harder than most. I think she'd managed to convince herself that Historia was still alive somewhere, or some shit. The wake up call was harsh, but needed.”

Eren just nodded. “I wish I hadn't been the one to do it, anyway.”

“Whatever. So, um...” Ymir reached into her pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. “This is Christa's cell number. And mine. She wanted me to come around and give it to you today, anyway. You just saved me the trip.”

“Oh.” Blinking in surprise, Eren gladly took the paper and smiled. “Thanks. That's, uh, I'm glad.”

“Yeah, yeah, don't get mushy on me, Alex.”

“Eren.”


They said their goodbyes and Eren headed back to the house with a spring in his step. He'd text Christa in a couple of days and see how she was faring. It was nice, knowing that she still wanted to be friends, after everything. Maybe his gift wasn't as big of a burden as he thought.

Levi was waiting at the car, leaning against the hood in those damn black skinny jeans, combat boots, and a Misfits skull t-shirt. Eren couldn't figure out which was more mouthwatering – suit Levi or casual punk Levi. Both made Eren's boxers uncomfortably tight.

“You look happy,” Levi said, eyeing Eren from head to toe in that way of his.

“I am,” Eren said with a stupid smile plastered on his face.

Levi nodded, the corner of his mouth quirking for a brief moment before he turned and unlocked the car. “Then get in, brat. Time to go home.”

Eren took a deep breath.

“Yeah. Home.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

WOWOWOW WE'RE BACK IN BUSINESS.

I can't believe I didn't post for so long. Throw me off a bridge and into a rocky quarry. But seriously, my kid is a menace. First the flu, then the cold, AND NOW THE FUCKIN CHICKEN POX. SHE'S NOT EVEN ONE. Lordy.

So, Eren gets compared to a Pokemon in this chapter. I'm sorry for those of you who are unfamiliar with Pokemon, but them's the breaks.

I wrote some side extras and I have two more that I'm on the verge of posting, as well. So check out the Strange!Verse section.

I love love love you all and have sooooo appreciated your attentions, comments, and friendliness.

The sky had come down like the wrath of God. A deluge of fat raindrops pounded on the roof as Levi sped along the snaking highway. A splinter of lightning shattered the gloomy sky, splitting it into two and breaking a wince from Eren.

He'd seen the storm coming. Ahead of them, miles down the battered pavement had been a black, hammerhead cloud like a fist punching through the heavens.

“Tornado?” Eren had said conversationally. They were no longer in twister season, but in the Midwest, that rarely meant much.

“Unlikely,” Levi had replied, “But we're gonna get hit.”

And they did. Hard.

With his temple pressed against the cool glass, Eren looked out into the grey, wondering if this was some kind of sign.

“You think the seasons are changing early?” Eren said, feeling a chill prickle his arms.

“It's barely September.”

“So, maybe.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Eren didn't say it, but he felt like it was more than just the seasons that were changing.

Either Levi sensed Eren's reticence and chose to continue the silence, or he was caught up in his own thoughts. Eren didn't mind. With his new gifts, even when he was alone, it was rarely really quiet. Several hours in the car with someone he was comfortable enough to relax around was like a dream come true, right now. This entire trip had been like a dream.
But Eren knew he couldn't keep up with Levi. He hoped it didn't seem as such on the outside, but it
was still true. Never had Eren been so swept up in a romance. And, Eren was going to admit it – this
was definitely a romance. A whirlwind.

But all whirlwinds died away, didn't they?

Eren shifted in his seat and slid a covert look toward Levi. The reflection of scattered raindrops
speckling the windshield dappled soft and grey across Levi's face. His expression was sober, neutral,
and impossible to read.

Where does Levi stand, Eren wondered, looking down and picking at a hangnail. How would they
act upon arriving at the house? Like it never happened? Like they weren't a couple. Were they a
couple?

Fuck, this was honestly why Eren did not do relationships. So much energy and emotion thrown into
a single person, who would almost inevitably leave. That's what happened ninety-nine percent of the
time, anyway.

Nodding to himself, Eren resolutely decided that he would simply follow Levi's lead. If Eren forced
himself to look at the wide landscape of his life, there was a lot more going on than just sex and all
that followed. His life had very recently been shaken up and scattered, the pieces so fragmented that
Eren was having to piece together an entirely different life from what he'd once known.

Eren didn't have the time to moon over Levi. Or, at least, not as much as he had been these past days.
A storm was on the horizon, and it wasn't the one that was currently beating down on them.

“Have you heard from the house?” Eren said.

“Yeah. The Hoover kid is awake.”

“What?” Eren shot up from his slouch and bumped his head on the roof with a muted curse. Rubbing
his crown, he eyed Levi with annoyance. “When the hell did this happen?”

“This morning.”

“And you didn't tell me?”

“You'd have found out when you got back, anyway. I figured you'd just stew over it the entire trip
home if you'd known sooner.”

“Yeah, well, that would have been my decision to make,” Eren said, crossing his arms and slumping
back into his seat to glower forward. “I was in charge of his life. I should've known the minute he
was on the mend.”

“Well, now you know.”

“Well, not soon enough.”

Levi flicked a warning look Eren's way. “Hey, kid, watch yourself. You're still under my roof and
my care, so I'll be making the executive decisions here.”

“It's not exactly that cut and dried, now is it?” Eren snapped back. For Christ's sake, they were
sleeping together. They held genuine affection for each other. And, on top of that, Eren was working
side by side with Father Erwin and Hanji with exorcisms. How could Levi think he could pick and
choose what Eren knew?
“I don't see how it's not,” Levi said, seemingly unmoved.

Eren bristled. “Um, have you forgotten that we fucked, Levi?”

“That's not related to my job.”

“The hell it isn't!” Eren could hear his voice raising, his blood pounding in his ears. The feeling was familiar; an anger from years past that threatened to envelop him in hot, spiny arms that, once around him, would refuse to let him go. It had been so easy to be angry all the time as a kid, as a teenager. Now, the idea of it made Eren mentally distance himself from the argument, from Levi. He didn't want to go there.

Eren tersely said into the tense silence, “Nevermind. I'm going to sleep.”

With the wind and rain shrieking in his ears, Eren shut his eyes and willed himself away. Maybe he was still a kid, because he sure as hell felt as confused as one.

When he next woke, they were in the correct state and not far from home. The rain had followed them, but had lessened considerably to a steady curtain.

Eren's neck was pinched from his strange sleeping position, and his heart hurt from fuck knew what. He sat up straight, flexing his fingers over his nape as he blearily blinked at Levi.

“Sleeping Beauty feel better?” Levi said, stopping at a red light and considering Eren with a quiet, thoughtful expression. He looked tired.

Eren squinted. “No,” was all he said. “How long until we're home? I want to see Bertolt.”

“Twenty minutes, maybe more because of the rain.”

“Sooner the better,” Eren said under his breath.

He was still pissed at Levi. Maybe it was because of his own insecurity in where they stood, but probably because, coupled with that uncertainty was Levi's apparent disregard for how their relationship had changed. Had this weekend really meant so little, or was Levi just that good at compartmentalising his emotions from his duties?

Levi seemed to take Eren's mood at face value and said nothing for the remainder of the ride. He squealed into the driveway of the house, and Eren was strangely struck with how pleased he was to see it again. When he'd walked up to his own house many days ago to confront his father, he hadn't experienced the same rush of happiness.

Without a backward look to Levi, Eren got out of the car and stepped into the rain. Immediately, he was soaked to the bone. Ignoring the bags in the truck, he headed for the front door, taking the porch steps two at a time.

Rushing through the door, Eren was wrapped in the warmth of the house and the sounded of chatter in the living room.

“How, I'm ho-”

Eren froze in the entry way of the front room, staring. It wasn't unusual to find Mikasa there, or even Jean, who had paused a video game to grin over his shoulder. It was the fact that not just Bertolt was sitting on the loveseat - his arms were bandaged to high hell and he looked pale - but Reiner was beside him.
Not knowing where to look first, Eren stood in his sodden clothes and gawked between Bertl and Reiner. He didn't think Bertl would be up and running so soon, nor did he think he'd ever see Reiner again. Eren had been in such a state during the exorcism and everything leading up to it that he'd essentially forgotten he'd seen Reiner at all. This was all so strange.

“Hi,” Reiner was the first to say, his smile wide across his strong jaw.

“Hi,” Eren said, aware that his voice was a little breathless with surprise.

“You look like a wet dog,” Jean said.

“Don't make me come over there,” Eren said with warning in his voice. He looked to Bertolt with a small smile. “Uh, hey. I'm Eren. We haven't met properly.”

“Hey,” Bertl said, his voice rough, probably from disuse. His gaze kept flicking from his feet to Eren's face. “Father Erwin told me what you did. I just... thanks. I don't really know how to express how grateful I am for what you did.”

Uncomfortably conscious of the eyes of the entire room upon his dripping self, Eren shrugged it off. “Anyone would have done the same in my place. I'm gonna change. I'll be back in a sec.”

Eren heard Levi enter the house and drop their bags on the ground. Suddenly, Eren really didn't want to look. He wasn't sure what kind of face to make around Levi, now that they had returned.

“Wait.” Reiner was out of his seat and across the room before Eren could protest. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Can it wait?” Eren said with a frown as he forced himself to head into the hall. Reiner followed, anyway.

“It can't. Or else I – I have no idea if I'll be able to say something so ridiculous lat-”

Reiner stopped beside Eren, who had stuttered to a halt to stare at Levi.

“You,” Reiner said, his deep voice accusatory. “What're you doing here?”

Levi looked between Eren and Reiner, then raised one slim eyebrow at the latter. “This is my house.”

“You fuckin' kidding me?”

“You're the last person I'd be interested in joking with.”

“Guys,” Eren said with exasperation.

Levi's scrutinising gaze flicked to Eren, surveying him from toes to eyes in that way which still made Eren antsy. “You do know you're going to clean up the flood you've trailed through the house.”

Eren scrunched his face up. “Yeah yeah.”

“So, what,” Reiner said, “Are you two dating?”

“No,” Eren said quickly, his cheeks going hot.

“We've never been on a date,” Levi said,-levelly meeting Reiner's eyes. He appeared regal even when he had to cock his head like he was looking up at a skyscraper.
“Good,” Reiner said with a nod. He turned to Eren and took his wrist with surprising delicacy. Reiner's expression was open and direct. “Then I can tell you that I've been thinking about you since that first time we met. And I feel like being pushed back together in this surreal way has to be a sign that we should at least try this out together.”

Eren gawked as he felt the blood drain from his face.

How much would he pay to hear Levi say something like that with such confidence and candor?

“Um.” Eren blinked up at Reiner, who was clenching his jaw with what must have been nerves. Did Eren ever make Levi nervous? “That's... a lot to take in. Uh. I'm gonna go change. 'Scuse me.”

Without making eye contact with either men in the hallway, Eren bowed his head and dashed up the stairs.

What the hell was that? Two weeks ago Eren would have been imploding with joy that someone as big and handsome and honest as Reiner would so blatantly pursue a relationship with him.

Now? Eren just felt uneasy, disconcerted.

And why hadn't Levi said anything? Had it been a test, or had Levi just not cared how that scene went down? Or maybe he'd been just as shocked as Eren, although Eren had a difficult time fathoming that one.

For fuck's sake, hadn't Eren just today told himself that he wouldn't dwell on this crap? He had other things with which to concern himself.

After stripping down in his room and towelling off his hair, Eren slipped on a pair of fitted boxers, when there was a short rap at the door.

Brow furrowed, Eren frowned as yanked at the knob. His heart skipped.

“Hey,” Eren said, searching Levi's stony expression for signs of anything. Right now, the wall seemed strong and high.

“Your bag,” Levi said shortly, thrusting it into Eren's arms. He turned on his heel to leave.

“Wait – hold up.” Rushing into the corridor, Eren disregarded everything and wrapped his arms around Levi from behind. Eren buried his nose against the soft crown of Levi's hair and inhaled. “As pissed as I am for a fucking list of things, you're still...”

*My only one.*

“Important to me. You might not think things have become complicated because you can see the world in black and white, but Levi, things *are* complicated now. But the one thing that *isn't* complicated is that I want to be with you.” Eren cleared his throat nervously. “Like, all the time.”

At Levi's stiff silence, Eren sighed into Levi's hair and began to drop his hands and slip away. “I know I'm being too quick with this crap and I'm a stupid ki-”

Levi's hand grasped Eren's firmly, right over his heart. “I'm good at a lot of things – relationships are not on the list,” Levi said softly. “But fuck if I'm not here, anyway.”

Releasing his hold on Eren and not turning back, Levi headed back downstairs.

Eren remained half-naked in the hall, smiling like a fucking idiot.
With that single sentence, Levi had admitted a hell of a lot. That this was more than black and white, yeah – but also that he cared enough to stick through this together. At least, for now.

Eren was elated.

On cloud nine, he returned to his room to continue dressing. He was tugging a hoody over his head, when he popped out the top and found himself staring into large, blue eyes.

“Armin!” Eren launched at him, hugging Armin tightly and getting a slight buzz off that electric warmth that radiated from his corporeal form. “How are you?”

“Oh, you know, dead. Same old, same old.” Armin replied as they pulled away, his small smile a little sheepish.

“Ha-ha. You're a laugh fucking riot. But really, what's new since I've gone?”

“That guy, Bertolt, is incredibly strong. I imagine he won't be here long.”

“Really? That's great news.”

“You were his exorcist, right?” Armin sat on the bed and Eren followed suit, staring down at his hands.

“Yeah. Shit, I just realised how long it's been since we caught up. There's so much I need to tell -”

“I heard the tape when you played it.”

Eren's heart slammed sharply against his ribcage. He just nodded at the floor. He didn't even want to go there yet. He was going to have to rehash a lot with Father Erwin, Hanji, and Levi soon, anyway.

“It was fucking hard. The exorcism. Looking back on it, I'm kinda surprised that I managed it.”

“Well, you'll either grow stronger and more competent from the experience, or each subsequent exorcism will make you weaker.”

“Huh?” Eren snapped his attention to Armin. “How would you know something like that?”

“I don't know, per say, but they're logical conclusions. You yourself expressed surprise at being able to perform a more difficult exorcism after such a short time. So it goes to say that you've increased in skill.”

“Like a fucking Pokemon,” Eren muttered.

Armin genuinely laughed, and it was such a surprising and nice sound. “Something like that. But even though you've levelled up, don't you think your HP is a bit low to continue battling?”

“It's more like I've been poisoned and my strength keeps getting sapped no matter what I do.”

Armin made a soft noise of understanding.

Eren heaved a sigh and rubbed his hands over his face. “Bertolt... When he was possessed, he called me a black haloed boy. I guess he could see it, too.”

“It has spread,” Armin said quietly.

Eren dropped his hands and turned to Armin with an aching bruise of dread spreading across his
“Yes... I've been thinking, Eren. That's about all I can do in this state, anyway. I've been thinking about what it could be, what caused it – how to get rid of it. But it's difficult with so little information.”

“Well, I... I'm hearing voices a lot. In my sleep. On the verge of waking. The words never made sense until I heard the tape. Some of the words Lilith said – they were what I'd heard in my head. I don't know where they're from, though. But she was – I mean, she had to have died or whatever when I pulled her out of my mom back then. Don't you think?”

“Unless she didn't die.”

“What do you mean?” Eren shivered, and knew it had nothing to do with the damp cling of rain to his hair and skin.

Armin pressed his lips together tightly, nodding to himself as if thinking something over. “Unless she merely jumped from a weak body to a stronger one. In that tape, she said – didn't she say that you'd become her son? She asked for her son and Dr. Jaeger said that you weren't her son. And she said... she said you would be.”

Numbing terror had gripped Eren by the throat and was slowly squeezing it's thin, icy fingers. With each shallow, uneven breath, Eren's lungs screamed for air. Pieces were falling into place, forming a growing vision of horror.

“Armin?” Eren barely recognised his own voice. It was closer to that of the young boy from the exorcism tape. Frightened and confused. “Armin? Do you think she – Lilith – do you think she's in me?”

“I don't want to jump to a conclusion so dire, but it appears to be a strong possibility.” Armin's warm hand rested over Eren's, atop his knee. Squeezed softly. “The question is, can a demon have such a power that they could cling to one person for so long without making themselves known? And, if that's indeed the case, then why now? How now? What's the plan?”

“I - I don't know.” Eren's voice cracked, twin spires of frustration and fear piercing him through, impaling him through and leaving him helplessly bleeding out with anxiety and anger. “Shit, I don't fucking know anything at this point, Armin. Answers just lead to more questions, and I chose to walk away from it all, as if when I got back everything would be magically solved. I really am a stupid kid.”

“You're not, Eren. Don't even go there. How many people do you think would just collapse beneath the stress you're carrying? The weight of responsibility? Don't cut yourself short just because you're panicking. You've got support. I may be losing memories of my time in this house, but I can still remember the feeling of comfort, of family that these walls keep safe. Use it, Eren. I can't be the only one you discuss this with. Use the resources you have in front of you.” Armin squeezed Eren's hand again and dipped his head to catch Eren's lowered gaze. He smiled slightly. “Don't let this get you down. Fight.”

Fight.

That's right. Eren was a fighter, wasn't he? Levi had said so, and Eren believed him. Eren just had to believe in himself.

“Sorry...” Armin's voice suddenly sounded faint, and the weight of his hand had evaporated. Eren
caught the end of Armin's voice as he fizzled away. “Tired... now...”

Eren sat there in the silence, staring at the wood grain of the floorboards for who knew how long.

Finally, with a deep breath, he pushed from the bed and stood. A determined frown gripping his mouth, he made his way downstairs, passed the catcalls from Jean in the living room, and made a beeline for the other end of the house. Levi wasn't in the kitchen or the library, so Eren knocked on his bedroom door.

Levi opened it a crack, his eyes sharpening on Eren's expression as he whipped the door wide open.

“What's the matter?”

“I need to talk to you. I need to talk to everyone.”

“I'll call Erwin and Hanji.”

“No, I mean everyone. The entire house.”

Levi's brow creased, his arms crossing as he leaned in the doorway, considering Eren. “Why?”

“Because I want everyone to hear what I have to say. I want to start a holy war.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

SOOOOO, I am a super mega dickhole, I know, I know. Real life got in the way. Baby with chicken pox, baby with first birthday, other crap. Also, I fell headfirst into the Roosterteeth fandom and watch all 96 Let's Play Minecraft episodes in like two weeks, which has ultimately destroyed me.

BUT YEAH, HERE I AM MAKING IT UP TO YOU WITH LIKE AN 8K CHAPTETR? DO YOU STILL LOVE ME? I STILL LOVE YOU.

Levi stared dismally at Eren. “What are you even fucking talking about, Jaeger.”

“Ah, listen...” Eren trailed off, dragging a hand through his still damp, slightly matted hair. “There's stuff I haven't been telling you. Or anyone. About what's been going on. And I guess, looking back at the accumulation of stuff that's happened to me – both of what you're aware of and also not – things are probably more serious than we've realised.”

Stony silence followed, as Levi folded his arms and steadily surveyed Eren's face. Mouth shut, Levi ran his tongue over his top teeth, something Eren had never seen him do before, but he wondered if it was a sign of pending implosion, or if Levi was just thinking really hard.

“Do you think I'm stupid?”

Well, that had been the very last thing Eren had expected.

“Huh?”

A thin eyebrow flicked up and Levi canted his sharp chin, his mouth a grim line as he met Eren's eyes. “Do I need to fucking repeat myself?”

“Well, I mean -”

“Did you seriously think I haven't noticed that you're hiding something? I've been around a lot longer than you, kid. And on top of that, you're a shit liar.”

Well, crap. Eren didn't know what the hell to make of this. He gawked at Levi, determined to keep his mouth shut, even as his wide eyes frantically searched Levi's face for anger or disapproval. He saw none. More than anything, Levi just looked bored and a little annoyed by this conversation.

The wind left Eren's sails, his shoulders sunk. “So... you know?”

“I know that there are things I don't know. I was and am prepared to wait you out. Erwin, too.”

Eren felt a knot of a alarm in his throat. “Father Erwin, too?”

“Erwin, especially. And I'd put my money on him sharing a lot more information with you if you'd do the same with him. Erwin likes equal trades, but he likes the upper hand even more. Hasn't it occurred to you that he's known about your ability since your were a child? Him and your father
were probably the only people. And now you're here, doing work for us. Seems like more than a coincidence, to me.”

Dumbfounded, Eren stood in the hall, swaying on weakened knees.

Of course. Of course. Father Erwin had been there. He'd seen what Eren had done. And he'd known who Eren was when he'd exorcised him and allowed him to stay in this house. Sure, that could have been just paying a debt to Eren's dad, just doing his duty as an exorcist. Or, there could be more to it. Had Father Erwin been waiting all of this time for Eren? And, if so, what did he really want with him?

And why the hell hadn't Eren's dad prepared him for any of this? Protecting him, sure, Eren could grasp that concept. But being in this house, with these people? Dad couldn't be cowardly enough that he assumed Father Erwin would sort it all out and Dad would just get out of the parental responsibility.


Confusion muddled Eren's mind as he blinked down at Levi. Just minutes ago, Eren had been so gung-ho, so ready to dive in to battle this demon that he was becoming frighteningly sure was lurking inside of him. He was going to use everyone's strength to get him through his, to help him as a friend, rather than doing it alone.

Now, he had no idea where to go or what to do. Hell, he felt like he was rushing in blind. As a teenager, that would have been enough. Eren had been great at closing his eyes and swinging for the walls.

But this mattered, big time. This was huge. Eren didn't want to fuck it up. What if Father Erwin or his dad actually knew how to help? What if this could be settled quickly and quietly, without getting everyone else entangled in Eren's mess? That would be preferable, wouldn't it?

“Christ, you have a one track mind. Hellooo?” Levi pinched Eren's side, his face screwed up with impatience. “Can you not think and function at the same time? You're not a deer in the headlights.”

“Sorry,” Eren said dully. He shook his head a bit, ripping himself from the strands of thought that had wrapped around him. “I just thought I knew what I was doing. Now, I'm not so sure.”

Levi considered him for a long moment, his eyes hooded and lazy. He heaved a sigh and waved a hand. “Come on, idiot. I'll make some tea.”

“Kay.” Eren followed obediently as Levi headed down the corridor.

The kitchen was sepia and grey from the storm outside, but Levi didn't bother flicking on the lights as he filled a modern silver kettle at the sink and set it atop the burner to heat. He turned and met Eren's eyes as Eren slipped onto one of the stools at the island and thumped his chin on his fists.

“So,” Levi said, his voice low, in tune with the mellow thrum of rain against the windows. “Tell me about the war.”

“It's stupid.”


“Lilith. I think she's inside me.” When Levi betrayed nothing by the admission, Eren swallowed and
continued on. Apparently this was monologue time. “You know I'd heard stuff in my dreams – stuff that we later found out was repeated in the exorcism tape. But it's not just stuff I happen to hear. Almost every night there's a woman who speaks to me. She recites things – they sound like, I dunno, chants or hymns or Biblical shit. And she says I'm perfect. Perfect for what, I don't know. But she's there. And when I wake up, I feel like she's still there with me.”

Still, Levi didn't speak. Eren didn't want to meet his eyes, so he picked at his fingernails instead. “And, um, there's been a ringing in my ears. Since day one. Every day it's there. Some days it gets louder. I don't know what that's about at all, but it stops me from sleeping a lot.”

The kettle whistled and Eren jumped in his seat. Levi just slid away and tended to the mugs he'd set out. His back and shoulders faced Eren, appearing strong and relaxed. Eren wondered how anyone could be so calm at a time like this. Or maybe that was what made Levi so good at what he did. In a dangerous storm, he was the seemingly calm eye.

“Well,” Eren added, remembering that there was seriously a lot he actually hadn't been sharing. “There's something black hanging over my head. Ar-Armin's mentioned it a couple times. He says it's getting worse, darker. And Bertolt saw it when he was possessed. So, I guess it was really the demon who saw it. I think – I don't know, but I mean if it's anything like the darkness I see surrounding people like Father Erwin, it's something bad. Probably also Lilith related.”

“Anything else?” Levi said lowly, returning to the island with two steaming mugs and sliding one towards Eren's hands.

As Eren cupped the mug in his hands, allowing the heat to sear his palms, he noticed his cuticles were bleeding a little. Stupid nerves. He hated how this entire situation was stripping him down. “I dunno. I don't think so. If anything comes to me I promise to actually share it. Earlier, I was talking to Armin –” Eren noticed the briefest flinching of Levi's fingers around his cup. “I was talking to Armin and he kinda made me realise that an army was better than one. I have you, Hanji, Father Erwin – everyone else. I've always been so used to going it alone that...”

Eren shrugged, trailing off. He brought the tea to his lips, finally peering at Levi over the rim of his mug.

A wrinkle marred Levi's brow as he met Eren's gaze. “That it?”

“That's it.”

“Then, first off -” Levi half got up from his seat to lean across the island and smacked Eren upside the head.

“Ah – Jesus, Levi! I have tea – boiling tea! My face could have been scarred for life!”

“Adds character.” Levi sat down and ran his thumb along the lip of his mug, looking secretly pleased with himself. “And you had it coming.”

“So you are angry.”

“Of course I'm fucking angry, you shitbrain,” Levi snapped, his eyes flinty as they cut across the table to Eren. “But I've got your number well enough to know that no one bullies you into anything you don't want to do. So, I had to wait all this fucking time for you to come to your peanut-sized senses and spill to me.”

The grin that had been tempting Eren's mouth wasted away. “Wait. You didn't sleep with me so that
I would -

“Oh, fuck you, Jaeger,” Levi said, looking like he'd sucked on something sour. “Do you think that has made my life easier? How about exponentially more of a hassle.”

Eren’s chest swelled, warming him from the inside out more than hot tea ever could.

“I'm a hassle, huh?” he said with softly curved lips and eyes shining with glee.

“Immensely.” Levi didn't sound particularly bothered, though, as he brought the tea to his lips and took a slow sip.

“I like that,” Eren said. “It means I get under your skin.”

“Drink your tea before I sew your goddamn mouth shut,” Levi said flatly, appearing wholly unamused.

They sat in companionable silence for a time. Eren drinking his tea and watching Levi in the dim light, while Levi pretended not to notice. The patter of the storm had lessened, a soft white noise in the background. Laughter echoed through the house from the living room, and Eren was again struck by how at home, how safe he felt within these walls.


Eren looked to Levi with his head slightly cocked. “Yeah?”

“I think we need to get your father here as soon as possible.”


“Don't act so fucking surprised. It's logical. Erwin and your father are the two people are bound to know more than the lot of us put together. As much as you may be at odds with your dad, he needs to know what's going on.”

Shoulders slumping, Eren looked into his mug. “Maybe he does know.”

“Tsch. You really think your father knows his son is infested by a powerful demon and has chosen to do nothing about it?”

“You don't know my dad very well,” Eren said, meeting Levi's gaze with a humourless crack of a smile.

Levi rolled his eyes and looked to the ceiling, as if asking God for patience. “Whatever. I don't care. You know he needs to be in on his and I'm putting my fucking foot down on it. I'm not letting this go on longer than necessary. We've already left it too long.”

Eren swallowed hard, feeling that familiar cold trickle of fear slither down his spine, leaving him raw and shivering. “Yeah. I know.”

Obviously noting Eren's shaking hands around his mug, a frown pulled at Levi's lips. “We've got this, kid,” he said roughly, his voice oddly hoarse. “Don't shit yourself over it or anything.”

A bubble of surprised laughter tickled Eren's throat, his chuckle breathy as he shook his head. “Wow. Thanks for the pep talk. You're a real team leader.”

“Cheering people up was never in my job description.” Levi took a long drink of his tea, now that it
had cooled.

“Oh, is that what you were doing?” Eren said, a smile creeping up on him, despite the circumstances surrounding him. No one had ever made him smile like Levi. It was strange how such a surly person had the gift to lift Eren up, even when the world was toppling over him.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Because I could think of plenty easier ways you could cheer me up.”

Levi's eyebrow shot up over the rim of his mug as he surveyed Eren's impish expression. “Ha ha,” he said darkly.

Eren was already sliding off his stool and rounding the island, though. When he took the mug from Levi's hands and placed it with a gentle crack on the counter, Levi said nothing, which only further egged on Eren.

“Just a little pick-me-up, 'kay?” Eren murmured, his lashes fluttering as his gaze dropped to Levi's pale mouth. When Levi's only was reply was to inhale in a quiet breath, Eren's curved lips took the silent invitation and softly met Levi's. With Levi on the stool, they reached the same height, their mouths in perfect harmony as the easy, languid kiss rocked them both.

Eren had intended to keep the kiss light, quick. It was Levi who opened up to him with a breath of a sigh against Eren's lips, Levi's hands coming up to cup Eren's jaw, warm fingertips pressing at his temples and beside his ears, pulling him just that extra bit into dizzying madness.

Time spun out in the exploration of Levi's mouth with slow, hot sweeps of tongue and light nips of teeth. The air dampened between them, hot and muggy in the rain-heavy atmosphere of the room. Each curl and slick of Levi's tongue in Eren's mouth left him reeling, made it harder and harder to breathe. Eren wanted to wrap himself around Levi and never release, never part from him; this person whose passions simmered surprisingly close to the surface.

One of Levi's hands smoothed toward the nape of Eren's neck and firmly gripped his hair. Eren's moan filled the room like a shock of lightning – just loud enough to remind them where they were and what they were doing. Eren's eyes shot open as Levi jerked back, their swollen lips just a breath apart.

Levi's pupils were blown black, his irises a thin, stormy ring. Even in the dim lightning, Eren could make out the delicate spray of freckles across the bridge of his nose. What had he heard that called before? A fairy saddle. Levi would brutally murder him if Eren ever voiced that.

“Batteries recharged,” Eren said hoarsely, a smile tugging at his mouth.

Levi blinked once, his eyes clearing as he scoffed a short laugh and used his hold on Eren's hair to yank him away. “Absolute fucking idiot.”

“You don't seem to mind,” Eren said, knowing that the shit eating grin on his face was probably tempting Levi's fist.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Listen up.” Levi cleared his throat, and it gave Eren a happy zing in his blood to note the effect he had on Levi. “Don't mention what we discussed to any of the others. Contact your dad and make it clear you need him here. When he arrives, whether it's hours or days from now, we're round up Erwin and Hanji and talk. In the mean time...”

Levi slid off the stool and collected the half-empty mugs and brought them to the sink. With his back
facing Eren, his voice was somewhat muffled a he quietly said, “In the mean time, we'll do some 
research on what we already know. And just. Be careful. Don't prove to me that you actually are 
stupid.”

Eren was glad Levi wasn't looking at him. His lovestruck smile was fucking ridiculous.

“I'll be careful, Levi.”

***

“Dad?”

“Eren? How are you, buddy?”

“I'm, y'know. Not great,” Eren was both surprised and ashamed at how his voice cracked. “I went 
back to the house. You weren't there.”

“Sorry, Eren, but I'm on business in Louisiana right now.”

“Yeah?” Eren said quietly. “Anything to do with exorcisms?”

There was a long pause on the other end. “Not today,” was all Dad said.

Red tinged the edges of Eren's vision and he viciously battled it back. “Yeah, well, maybe you 
should be thinking about a different exorcism victim right about now, Dad. Like your fucking son.”

“What's the matter? Are you relapsing?”

Eren's harsh laugh sounded more like a sob to his ears. “You could say that. Dad... Dad, I heard the 
tape. I know about Mom. I know what you did, and what Father Erwin did.” Eren sucked in a shaky 
breath, his hand going clammy and sweaty on his phone. “I know what I did.”

“Eren -”

“It's still in me, Dad,” Eren said in the softest voice.

“What? I didn't hear you.”

“Lilith,” Eren spat out the word, tasting the bile in his throat. “She was never really gone. I didn't just 
pull her out. I pulled her into me.”

There was such a thick silence on the other end that Eren might have thought he'd been hung up on. 
At this point, he wouldn't put it past his father.

And, just like that, Dad's voice warbled uncertainly through the line.

“I'm coming.”

The line went dead. Eren stared at the phone in his hand for who knew how long. It wasn't until Levi 
took the cell from his clenched fingers and set it aside that Eren peered up from his seat at the foot of 
Levi's bed.

“He's coming.”

“I heard.” Lightly, Levi ruffled Eren's hair, his palm lingering warmly against Eren's scalp, before 
sliding away. “Come on, brat. Let's feed the zoo. You need it eat too.”
Eren couldn't stomach the thought of food, but he nodded anyway, knowing it was best. Dragging his heels a little, he followed Levi back to the kitchen, where the lights were flicked on to illuminate the comforting creams and dark woods of the room.

It seemed natural that they cooked together. Levi rummaged through the fridge and set out ingredients for lasagne, absentmindedly ordering Eren to get chopping on the vegetables. They worked side by side, exchanging few words as Levi worked at the red and white sauces, and Eren diced away.

“Where'd you learn to cook?” Eren found himself asking. He'd finished his prep and was at the sink, hand-washing his cutting board and knife.

“Like most people, I guess. Food Network.”

Eren snorted a laugh. It seemed so normal. He didn't know why, but every time he learned that Levi did certain things like average people, it filled Eren with a spark of glee. Levi always appeared so unattainable, so put together, smart and sharp and special. Imagining him in his sweats, watching Rachel Ray was ludicrous.

Then Eren realised he'd love to be the one beside Levi while they did a thousand mundane things. Like this – cooking together, perfectly in synch.

“You like to cook, don't you?” Eren said.

“Aside from the mess it leaves.”

“I think pretty much everyone feels that way.”

“Don't fucking lie. I saw the wasteland you happily left after making pancakes.”

Eren ducked his head and grinned as he set his washing to air dry in the tray. “That was different.”

Levi scoffed and threw a dark look over his shoulder as Eren approached him. “Like fuck it was. Egg shells. Egg shells everywhere. You're a kitchen nightmare.”

“I was distracted,” Eren said, dropping a kiss on top of Levi's head.

Eren got a stare like a thousand butcher knives.

“Don't ever kiss me like I'm your tiny housewife.”

Eren yelped and promptly ran out of the room. He knew his smile was goofy as he wandered into the living room to let everyone know when dinner would be, but he didn't mind.

The ground could be opening up beneath Eren and he could still smile if Levi was there.

***

Dinner was a boisterous affair that left little room for darkness or moping. Father Erwin was notably absent, and Annie was drowning in the wet soccer fields at after school practice, but the table was still rammed with people.

Levi remained at the head of the table, and had stripped from his suit jacket and rolled up the crisp, white sleeves of his shirt. He almost looked relaxed among the raucous din of his 'zoo' at feeding time. Eren sat to his right, once again surprised at how much he ended up eating. Jean sat directly across from him, and beside Jean was Mikasa. Reiner had sneaked into the seat beside Eren, and Bertolt sat at the foot of the table.
Most of the conversation surrounded around Jean's loud mouth and Eren disputing nearly everything he said. But as everyone became more full and lazy, conversation dwindled and chilled out. Reiner checked the clock on his phone.

“I'd better be going. Work.”

“What do you do?” Eren asked. He was still painfully aware that he hadn't properly turned Reiner down, but now wasn't exactly the time.

“I'm a bouncer at a club a couple of towns out.”

“Seriously?” Jean shot to attention, his eyes gleaming. “Where?”

“Titan.”

“No way, dude! I heard that club is hella hard to get into.”

“That's because I'm at the door,” Reiner said with a small grin.

“Can you get us in sometime?”

“Not if any of you are under twenty-one,” Reiner said, clearly a stickler for rules if the sobriety on in his face had anything to say about it.

“That sounds like fun,” Eren said, surprising himself. “Could you really get us in?”

Reiner's cheeks reddened as he looked at Eren. “Um. Yeah. Of course. Just come on a day when I'm working. I'll give you my number.”

They exchanged numbers at the table, and soon Reiner was standing and moving to Bertolt. He dropped a hand on his friend's shoulder and squeezed. “Take care of yourself, big guy. If you don't, I'll have to take care of you myself, and we both know that I have an awful bedside manner.”

Bertl replied with a slow, genuine smile and huffed a soft laugh. “Yeah, yeah, of course. I'll see you soon.”

“Tomorrow, probably.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

They all said their goodbyes to Reiner, and once he'd gone, it wasn't long before everyone began clearing plates. Levi excused himself immediately, stating that he had business to take care of, which wasn't all that unusual for him. There had been paperwork he'd mentioned days ago, after all.

“Washing duty is all on you tonight, Eren,” Mikasa said with a fond smile.

Eren wrinkled his nose. “Why?”

“Because you've skipped out and disappeared on us for the last couple of days, that's why.” Mikasa thrust all of the plates into Eren's hands and gave him a little wave.

“I thought we were friends,” Eren said mournfully, watching as Mikasa leaned into Jean and wandered off with him.

“Best friends!” she called out, a laugh riding her low voice.
“I'll help,” Bertolt said, causing Eren to jump a little. He'd almost forgotten the guy was in the room. For someone so tall, he had such a quiet presence.

“Yeah?” Eren said, mustering a smile. “Sure you're up for it?”

“Believe me, I'm up for it,” Bertl said as he followed Eren into the kitchen, carrying some cups with him. “All of this sitting around is already driving me a little crazy.”

“It's the fucking worst, right? At first you're like, oh yeah, relaxation. But the end, it just kind of feels like a prison.”

Bertolt just nodded as he sidled up beside Eren, who taken to washing the dishes. He handed a plate over to Bertl to be dried.

“Does it ever get better?” Bertl said.

“Huh? Yeah, yeah it does. I mean, you're weak right now, so there's fuck all you can do aside from like, read and watch TV and fuck around on the internet. But as you get stronger, and as they see you're getting better, you'll get more freedoms. Going out and stuff.”

“Is that why you got to leave for so long?”

“Uh.” Eren concentrated on looking down into the sink. “Not really. I had to leave to clear my head. I'm going through some shit, I guess.”

“Shit that has to do with the fact that you managed to pull a demon out of me?” Bertl said softly.

Eren forced a laugh. “Yeah. Something like that.”

Bertl lightly bumped Eren's shoulder with his arm. “This is going to sound selfish, but I'm at least glad you had that ability when it came to me. I owe you, Eren. Like, I owe you my life.”

Eren felt his face go up in flame. “Y-yeah, well, it's no biggie. Like I said, anyone in my shoes would have done the same.”

“I'm not so sure of that. But thanks, anyway.”

“I – you're welcome. I'm glad you're alright.”

“Getting there.”

Conversation moved onto other topics as they tidied up. Bertl had a lot of the same questions as Eren had in the beginning. Peoples' back stories, how the house functioned, what would happen to his school work, etc. Eren was happy to answer what he could, but he could tell that Father Erwin had informed Bertl of way more than Levi had done to start off.

“You look tired,” Eren said as he grabbed two waters from the fridge and tossed one to Bertl. It was caught easily, but the white, bandaged arms were stark in bright kitchen, and reminded Eren that Bertl hadn't been long awake.

“Yeah,” Bertl said with a sigh. “I feel it, too. I guess it's back to bed to watch Netflix on my laptop.”

Eren chuckled. “You're a much better patient than I was when I first got here. I just kept pushing myself until I'd pass out for long periods of time.”

“That can't be healthy,” Bertl said with a frown.
“You're tellin' me. Anyway, I'll let you go. Get some rest, okay, man?”

“I will.” Bertl paused, offering a smile and warm gaze. “Thanks again, Eren. Really.”

“Don't mention it again, Bertl. Really,” Eren said, as good-naturedly as possible, but hoping Bertl really got the hint.

Once Eren was alone, his thoughts wandered. He idly sipped from his water bottle, walking to the back door to look out towards the sodden back yard, cloaked in evening darkness. He could still hear the rain, but only faintly.

So, Dad was coming back. What would that bring, Eren wondered. What did he know that Eren didn't already? He hoped this wasn't a wild goose chase. He hoped someone had an answer for Eren.

Because how could Eren get a demon out of him, when he was the only one who'd been able to pull her out in the first place? Find someone stronger than him? Was there anyone stronger than him? Or, that is, what there anyone with same gifts as him, but better? Eren had no way of knowing.

And if – if – at the end of it all, it was down to just Eren to – what? – exorcise himself... how would he ever manage that one?

Eren sighed. He supposed only time would tell.

***

Midnight was creeping in. Eren had showered and thrown on flannel pyjama pants and a ratty, old high school t-shirt. He'd laid in bed, trying to distract himself with games on his phone, but when he only felt more wired, Eren sighed and shoved himself from the blankets.

He padded downstairs with bare feet, glad to hear the house cloaked in quiet. Sneaking his way down the corridor, Eren lightly knocked at Levi's door.

No answer came. Maybe he was sleeping heavily. Eren had seen the way Levi collapsed face first in his pillow and basically died the minute he hit the mattress.

Deciding to brave the consequences, Eren turned the knob and peeked into the unlit room. He frowned as he noted the still made bed.

Closing the door again, walked further, noting a soft glow beneath the library door.

The sound of handle must have alerted Levi, because he was already watching the door when Eren popped his head in.

“Hey,” Eren said softly, his voice at a near whisper.

“You should be sleeping,” Levi said in reply. He sat at the large, wide desk, opened books strewn across the surface, the glow of his laptop casting his face in eerie blue. The mauve shadows beneath his eyes were deep..

“So should you.”

“I've got better things to do.”

Figuring it was safe to come in, Eren shut the door behind him an meandered to the desk. Curiosity was tugging him sharply towards the array of texts – all of which seemed to be related to demons and
“As much as I appreciate you doing this for me,” Eren said, lifting a heavy tomb to frown at a rather graphic depiction of two demons doing the dirty, “I’d rather you not kill yourself in the process.”

“As if I’d die for someone like you,” Levi said under his breath, his eyes fixed on the monitor.

Eren huffed a soft laugh and returned the book to where he’d found it.

“It’s been a long day,” Eren said, leaning a hip against the desk, allowing one hand to trail over the opened pages of the books. He caught several variations of the name ‘Lilith’ and his gut twisted sharply.

When Levi didn’t reply, only continued to intently read, Eren bit back a sigh and came around the desk. Without warning, he swiveled Levi in his chair, and placed his hands on the armrests either side of Levi, caging him in.

“Eren,” Levi said, his mouth twisting in aggravation as he tore his gaze from his computer to shoot daggers up at his offender. “What the fuck do you want?”

“You,” Eren said simply, locking eyes with Levi's hard ones. “Isn't it obvious? You can't be the only one taking care of someone. Has to go both ways, y'know?”

Levi's eyebrows climbed, incredulous humour curling into a crooked smile that never failed to make Eren's heart flip. “You've gotta be kidding me.”

“Not kidding.” Eren reached out and slapped the laptop closed.


“And you're overworked.” Eren leaned in, brushed his nose against Levi's. “How long have you been in here? Four hours without a break?” Eren brought his lips to Levi's ear and nipped the lobe, grinning at the hiss of pleasure he received. “Let me help you relax, Levi.”

“Eren -”

“Lemme help,” Eren murmured, his lips brushing the delicate skin beneath Levi's ear.

“Eren -”

Between Levi's legs, Eren dropped to his knees and wet his lips slowly, all the while peering up at Levi's flushed face.

“Can I?” Eren said huskily, his fingers already dancing over the zip of Levi's pristine slacks.

“You really are a fucking hassle,” Levi said, his voice a little breathless. Despite his words, he reached forward to card his hands through Eren's hair. “A fucking menace,” he said, hushed.

“Mmm.” Eren hummed a noise of blissful agreement as he tilted his head into Levi's hands, revelling in the feel of Levi's gentle petting.

Without looking to Levi for encouragement, Eren firmly wedged himself between Levi's thighs and unzipped his fly. His lips quirked at the sight of Levi's cock already beginning to strain against the thin material of his boxers.

“See,” Eren said hoarsely as he freed Levi's dick and softly squeezed the base, feeling it thicken.
further in his hand. “You need me around. To help.”

“Wouldn't-” Levi swallowed hard, meeting Eren's eyes as Eren dipped his head to press a wet kiss to the head. “Wouldn't be a problem if you weren't around.”

At that, Eren actually laughed. “Just enjoy yourself, you stubborn jerk.”

Before Levi could muster another snarky reply, Eren slipped his mouth over the crown of Levi's cock and swallowed him down. The gasp that sounded in Eren's ears was like music, and the way Levi's thighs tensed and shook was heaven.

Eren found a rhythm quickly. With his fingers wrapped firmly at the root, his hand twisted and pumped in time with the wet, messy bobbing of his mouth. Eren's lips buzzed from the friction, his tongue lapping up every salty-slick drop that leaked forth too early.

And when Levi fully gave in and slumped back in the chair with a groan, Eren hummed his pleasure around Levi's dick. Levi's breath hitched sharply, the hands that been mostly still in Eren's hair fisting up, knotting in the disarray and pushing Eren further down Levi's cock, impaling Eren's bruised mouth with sudden, sure force.

Eren took it as a challenge and dove in, taking Levi's dick to near choking point, then back up to the tip and all the way back down. Before he could do any more, Levi was murmuring breathless curses as he held Eren still by the hair. Levi's back arched as he fucked right up into Eren's hot, wet mouth, the delicious weight of Levi's dick smacking Eren at the back of his throat.

“Jesus, Eren.”

With tears welling up along his eyelashes, Eren looked up to Levi in wonder, his whole body going up in flame at the sight of Levi watching him with black eyes and red cheeks, his gaze gleaming with unabashed desire. Levi's hips bucked up and Eren just took it with a content little mmmm.

“Unbelievable. Fucking unbelievable.”

In the moment they locked eyes, Eren suctioned his mouth deep and firm around Levi's cock, clamping around him so tightly that it wrenched a cry from Levi just before he came, hot and hard down Eren's throat. Choking a little with the effort, Eren greedily swallowed each spurt, mentally cheering for himself as Levi's cock continued to pulse and his noises became a bit more desperate and surprised.

When his orgasm finally quieted and the fingers in Eren's hair loosened, Eren popped his mouth off of Levi and laid his cheek on Levi's thigh with a contented sigh. Yeah, he had a raging hard-on in his pants right now, but that hadn't been the point of all this. Levi did so much for Eren – was still doing so much – and Eren just wanted to repay him in a way that would make a difference, even if for a few minutes.

“You're ridiculous,” Levi muttered, his voice heavy and sated.

Eren's lips twitched. “Didn't hear you complaining.”

“Never gave me the chance.”

“I'm good at ignoring peoples' complaints and just doing whatever the fuck I want.”

“No shit.”
Eren sat up a bit an began to tuck Levi's dick away, but his hands were slapped and Levi did it himself. Sitting back on his heels, Eren considered Levi and muffled a yawn. “Bed now?”

Eren had fully expected to fight on this one. But Levi just rolled his eyes an heaved a sigh. “Fine.”

“Yes!” Eren said a bit too loudly as he bounced up from the floor. He grabbed Levi's wrist and tugged him from the chair. “Leave all of this crap for tomorrow and .”

“It's not crap.”

“Blah blah blah, all I hear is bed time,” Eren said as he dragged Levi down the hall and into the bedroom.

“How fucking old are you, again?”

Eren smile and busied himself with unbuttoning Levi's shirt. The spread of exposed tattoos still thrilled him.

“Old enough to give you one hell of a BJ.”

Levi just blinked at Eren as he allowed himself to be undressed.

“Christ.”

“He probably doesn't want to hear about my BJs.”

“Just shut up and get in the bed, Jaeger.”

“Thought you'd never ask.”

Eren's own throaty whimper was the first thing to wake him. He felt hot from head to toe, flushed and overwhelmed, his skin buzzing like he'd been in the sun too long.

“Eren,” a warm, familiar voice coaxed him to the surface.

Eyelids fluttering open, Eren found himself squinting up at a face that matched the voice.

“Levi?” Eren's voice was a sleepy croak. “What're y-aah!” Eren's hips bucked as he felt a warm palm cup his balls, rolling and squeezing gently. “Jesus. Jesus. Oh god, okay, I remember where I am now.”

“Handy,” Levi murmured against Eren's throat, dropping wet, open-mouthed kisses down Eren's chest. “I was getting impatient.”

Eren keened softly, his arms flinging over his head as he stretched, long and languid, basking in the lap of Levi's tongue over his nipple and clever fingers lazily pumping his cock. “What time's it?”

“Time for you to shut up and let me fuck you.”

“Mmm. I can do the latter, but no promises on the -” Another yelp claimed Eren as Levi's thumb idly circled his ass. “Oh – kay, shutting up now.”

Words dwindled into murmurs and moans, Eren basking the heat of Levi, which seemed to surround him from all directions. The sun pooled its soft, golden light around them as they tussled and rolled,
biting back inappropriate laughter and sudden groans.

Palms passed over sweat-slick skin, Levi seemingly intent on mapping every one of Eren's freckles with fingertips and tongue. Especially the one hidden along his inner thigh. The scratch and rub of Levi's unshaven cheek against Eren's skin sent sparks and thrills through his limbs like fireworks. In this bed, with soft sheets whispering around their waists and urgent mouths on any available stretch of skin, Eren could swear the dark would never touch him again.

Levi spent too long opening Eren up, to the point where Eren was a writhing mess, babbling and begging, promising anything if Levi would just own him already. The ache of emptiness was a pulsing chasm just waiting to be filled, just praying for Levi to make him whole and drive him to maddening completion.


Eren didn't care if he chanted Levi's name until he died. He whimpered and grabbed at Levi's hips, urging him forward.

"I like the begging," Levi said hoarsely, hooking one of Eren's knees over his shoulder and pressing the head of his cock against Eren's yearning hole. "Nice change from back-talking."

"Levi!" Eren didn't care if his squeal was fucking indignant, he was dying here.

There was a flash of that devilishly crooked smile, perfect teeth, soft laugh just before Levi eased completely in with one long, unyielding thrust. Eren's cry of relief and perfect pain lit up the room, echoing loudly in his ears. But he was too far gone to be embarrassed. Instead, he was rutting mindlessly into the shallow thrust of Levi's hips.

It wasn't enough – not nearly enough. There was a gasp on Levi's part as Eren slipped his leg from Levi's shoulder and reared up. Levi went tumbling back, sitting on the bed as Eren mounted his lap, wrapped his arms around Levi's neck and seated himself down on Levi's dick.

"Fuck, Eren," Levi managed, his voice strangled as Eren tilted his head and eagerly rode Levi's cock as hard as his weakening thighs would allow. "Gonna be the fuckin' death of me," Levi ground out against the damp skin of Eren's throat.

The smack and slap of Eren's ass against Levi's thighs coupled with their heavy, mingled breath only drove Eren to further madness. He slumped forward, his forehead dropping to Levi's shoulder.

"Touch me, Levi, touch me."

"Yeah." Levi's free hand clenched Eren's hip with bruising force while the other shoved between them to grasp Eren's painfully stiff dick. "God, yeah."

Eren's breath was coming out in harsh huffs with each lift and drop of his hips, but it wasn't enough. Levi's hand worked him over slick and rushed, and it still wasn't enough. With a whimper of frustration, Eren took Levi's face in his hands, tilted his chin up and captured his mouth in a sloppy, desperate kiss.

Yes.

Levi bit off a growl against Eren's mouth and tore at his bottom lip with his teeth. "Love you like this." He took Eren's mouth again and again, battering him with different angles and thrusts of tongue, his hand pumping Eren's cock, quick and sharp.
“You fuckin' ruin me,” Levi rasped against Eren's mouth – and it broke him.

Eren cried out into Levi's mouth, as he impaled himself down hard on Levi's pulsing cock. White heat shot through him as he came over Levi's hand. Eren couldn't stop the shudders that vibrated through his body, and it was obviously enough to send Levi over the edge because he was panting in Eren's ear and hissing his name, his forehead thumping against Eren's sweaty shoulder.

They sat like that for a while, with Eren slumped in Levi's lap. With a groan and a wince, Eren was the first to move as he shifted his hips enough to let Levi slip out of him. With a pathetic whimper, Eren stretched his legs out on either side of Levi, although, he remained sitting on his lap, clinging to him with arms slung loosely around his neck.

“So, what time is it actually?” Eren murmured against Levi's skin. He smelled good, even when sweaty.

“Sixish?” Levi sounded groggy, his voice deeper than usual, more mellow. “Dunno.”

“Mmm, you're an excellent alarm clock.”


Eren yelped but didn't part from him. In fact, he just burrowed his face further into the crook of Levi's neck and shoulder, and was delighted when Levi didn't argue about it. Maybe there was a secret cuddler in him.

“Hey, Levi?”

“What.”

“Can we just stay this way all day?”

Levi's laugh was brief, but genuine. Not harsh or judgemental. “Get off me, brat.”

“What'll you give me if I do?” Eren asked, nuzzling Levi's ear with his nose.

“I don't strangle you out of sheer frustration and you live another day.”

Eren considered it for a while. He smiled.

“Deal.”
“You seem different,” Mikasa said, not looking up from her notes.

Eren’s pen stilled. He’d been helping Mikasa write out studying notecards for some big test, but now he was completely rattled.

“My hair is longer.”

Mikasa’s lips twitched. “And you’re always on my ass about getting a cut. You look like a Californian surfer bro.”

“Gross. That’s reason as any to chop it all off, I guess.” But Levi liked it. At least, he liked to pull it.

“But seriously. You seem more – I don’t know. Less brooding.”

“You make me sound like an emo or something,” Eren said with a grimace as he tried to concentrate on the card he was writing out about heart valves or some shit.

“No way,” Mikasa said in her usual dulcet tones. “You’ve been through so much shit, Eren, it’s a miracle you’re still walking and talking like a normal person. I just mean you seem a little lighter. Like something good happened while you were away.”

Eren couldn’t fight his smile as he flicked a look towards Mikasa. Her watchful gaze lit up, just a little.

“Maybe I shouldn't ask,” she said slowly. “It's probably something I don't even want the details on.”

Eren’s smile sharpened to a grin. “You really are the smart one in this house.”

They continued on with the notecards, of which Eren felt like there were literally hundreds. Actually, there may well have been a hundred. He was so thankful he’d never be a doctor.

“Oh, hey,” Mikasa said, her head popping up from her work. “I forgot to mention. Jean and I are going to Titan tonight. Want to come? I promise it won't be an awkward third wheel thing.”

“I know it wouldn't be,” Eren said, waving her concern off. “But I can't, sorry. I'm actually expecting my dad this evening, so...”

“Wow. Your Dad, huh?”

Eren shrugged a shoulder. “Yeah.”

“I'm going to take a stab in the dark and say that's going to be rough.”

Eren managed a short laugh. “Probably an understatement, but yeah. So, maybe another time.”
“Do you want me to stay behind?” Mikasa reached out to touch Eren’s hand, but her fingers recoiled just a little and she set them on the table beside his. “I’d be more than happy to.”

“Nah, don't worry about it.” Eren let his hand rest on Mikasa's sleeve-clad wrist and lightly squeezed. “Go have fun with your stupid boyfriend.”

“If you insist.”

“Oh,” Levi said as he popped his head into the dining room. “I'm going to the grocery store since someone's going to start gnawing their hand soon if I don't. Anyone want to join?”

He was dressed devastatingly in skinny black jeans, huge black Doc Martins, a Coheed and Cambria shirt and a black leather jacket. He should not legally be allowed to dress like that, to be perfectly honest. Eren felt like a complete reject in his ripped jeans, scuffed sneakers, and teal hoodie, but that certainly didn't stop him from jumping to attention.

“I'm up for it. I need to get out, anyway.”

“Hey,” Mikasa said with a frown. “What about my notecards, you dick.”

“Oh, shit, sorry. Nevermind, Levi,” Eren said as he flopped back down in his seat.

Mikasa puffed out a breath. “Doofus, I was kidding. Jean's been sleeping in all morning, and I'm really just waiting him out until I can force him to study with me all day.”

“Oh.” Eren's face lit up. “Okay. Well, good luck with it. Be back soon.”

“See ya,” Mikasa said to Eren’s retreating back.

Eren exchanged a silent look with Levi, grinned, and followed him outside. The air smelled bright and crisp, of wet grass and the passing storm. Eren inhaled deeply as he made his way to Levi's car.

“Rain's stopped.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Levi said, without any heat as he slipped into the drivers seat.

Eren got in beside him and buckled up. “Got a shopping list?”

“Always do,” Levi said, rummaging in his leather jacket and chucking a crumpled sheet of paper at him.

Unfolding the note, Eren had to stifle a laugh. “Is this all in order of aisle number?”

“It's called efficiency. A house of this many brats demands it,” Levi said as he squealed from the driveway and sped down the slick road.

“Cute,” Eren said under his breath, refolding the list.

“Did you fucking say something, Jaeger?” Levi snapped, shrieking to a stop at a red light.

Eren flinched in his seat and swallowed hard. “Nooope.”

“Thought not.”

“So...” Eren said after a time, “This is a pretty coupley thing, isn't it?”
“Eh?”

“Like, going grocery shopping together. It's very coupley.”

Levi slid a disturbed look Eren's way. “Shut up before you embarrass yourself, Eren.”

“Yeah, I think that's a good idea too,” Eren said quickly.

They drove to the store in relative silence. When they arrived and grabbed a shopping cart, Levi wordlessly went ahead to the fresh fruit and vegetable section, so Eren followed.

“Oh, can we get strawberries?” Eren asked, sidling up beside Levi with a few punnets in hand.

Levi glanced between Eren's face and the berries. “Yeah, of course. But don't pick those ones. They're bruised. Look through all of the containers to find the best ones.”

“Aren't they all basically the same?” Eren asked as Levi began to lift up punnet after punnet to inspect the strawberries inside.

“Hell no. They -”

“Eren?”

Eren froze at the familiar voice and slowly turned, an automatic smile already plastered on his face. “Hey, Connie.”

“Holy shit, it really is you!” Connie jumped in with wide grin, encompassing Eren in a back-slapping hug that Eren struggled to return. “You, like, dropped off the face of the planet after high school. It's great to see you. You look – you look really hot.”

Eren nearly choked on his own spit, but did well to hide the reaction. He could feel the dark stare of Levi burning holes into the back of his head.

“Well, um, I had to get out of the awkward teen phase at some point, right? You look good, too.”

“Well, yeah, no surprises there, right?” Connie said with an outrageous wink and a laugh. “So who's your friend? Hey there.” Connie waved, outgoing as ever. “I'm Eren's ex-boyfriend.”

And Eren would have been happy for an entire display of Diet Coke bottles to fall on him right now.

“Oh,” Eren said intelligently.

“And I'm Eren's current boyfriend,” Levi said, moving to stand right beside Eren, their shoulders brushing. “Hi. I've heard absolutely nothing about you.”

Oh god, these were surely Eren's last moments. He was either going to drop dead with mortification or Levi would murder him.

Or, most likely, Eren would die of sheer giddy elation at hearing Levi call himself Eren's boyfriend.

“I'm not surprised,” Connie said, his smile still in place. “We had a thing, but I wouldn't exactly equate it to High School Musical or anything.”

Connie reacted good-naturedly, as he always had. It was one of the things that allowed them to be some semblance of a couple. As a teenager, Eren had been so consumed with anger that it had taken an extremely laid back person to deal with his snappiness and sudden outbursts of violence.
“So, Eren,” Connie said, fully facing him. “Still punch anything that looks at you the wrong way?”

“Um.” Eren sheepishly ruffled the back of his hair. “No? I’m pretty much over that embarrassing chapter in my life.”

“Glad to hear it. Sometimes you’d cross my mind and I hoped you weren’t in jail yet, or anything.”

“How thoughtful,” Eren said dryly. “Well, we better -”

“Yeah, no, of course,” Connie said with an easy laugh. “I’ll see you around, Eren. Take care.” He made a gun gesture with his hand, clicking behind his teeth as he pointed at Levi. “You too. Bye.”

“God,” Eren said as he watched Connie walk away. “That could have gone a lot worse.”

“You’ve got some reputation, kid,” Levi said, promptly shoving a container of strawberries against his chest.

Eren made a face. “Yeah, well, let’s just say I had a lot of anger management issues back then.”

“And now?” Levi pushed the cart along, aiming a raised eyebrow Eren’s way.

“I’m a lot less intense, believe me.”

“What changed?”

“Ummm.” Eren pursed his lips, mulling it over as Levi bagged some veggies. “I guess I got tired of people being scared of me. Or intimidated. Or just generally annoyed by my presence. So when I left high school, I made a conscious decision to mellow out. I relieved my excess energy at the gym a lot, and learned to talk less shit and listen a little more. It got easier over time and -” Eren shrugged, feeling like an idiot for talking about shit like this in the damn produce section. “And now it’s just me, I guess. It’s not like I still don’t get irrationally angry from time to time -”

“Oh, I know.”

Eren laughed and shoved Levi with his shoulder, getting an elbow in his side in return.

“What about you?” Eren asked after a couple minutes, when they were half way through the list.

“What about me?” Levi said, frowning as he inspected the nutritional label on a box of cereal.

“Have you always been like this?”

Slowly, Levi looked up, his eyebrows raising in question. “Like what, exactly?”

Oh, god. Eren felt like he’d just walked into a minefield. “Um. I mean, have you always been kind of cool and... and like, detached, you know?”

Levi paused, his hooded gaze watching Eren carefully. Then, he haphazardly tossed the cereal into the cart and gave a small shrug. “Sure. Probably.”

“Not that it’s a bad thing,” Eren said hurriedly, following Levi with the cart and talking too loudly. “I like it. I like that you’re not close to everyone and -”

“Like you are?” Levi tossed over his shoulder.

“Huh?” Eren stopped, while Levi continued to walk. It took a good long while of gawking, while
Eren's brain scrambled to put together the pieces of what Levi said and what he'd meant.

Eren's face broke into a wide grin and he chased after. “Hold up!”

Squealing to a halt where Levi was grabbing a massive container of eggs, Eren rounded the cart and took the eggs right from Levi's hand.

“Hey,” Eren said, his lips curving as he met Levi's subtly sulking expression. Oh god, he could be so cute. “Isn't it painfully obvious that I'm crazy about you? Just you.”

For a brief second, something soft and hopeful flashed in Levi's expression, before he was scrunching his face in disgust. “Eren, don't be creepy.”

Even though Levi immediately turned away to continue shopping, Eren couldn't help but do a little victory dance in his head. Maybe they weren't so different after all. At least, where it mattered most. They both wanted to be each other's most important person, even if one of them wasn't admitting it.

In the car, on the way home, Eren rummaged through Levi's glove compartment and found Levi's sunglasses, putting them on himself for fun. He leaned his head back against the headrest and looked over at Levi with a grin, and was pretty damn surprised to see Levi not just roll his eyes at him, but eke out a smile and huff a short laugh.

“Do you think it's weird?” Eren said, pitching his above the wind that whipped through the open windows. The sun and warmth had come out to play while they'd been shopping.

“I think a lot of things are weird,” Levi said.

“I mean, us. We haven't known each other all that long.”

“I know.”

When Levi didn't say anything more, Eren cleared his throat and said kind of quietly, “Is it weird that it doesn't feel weird, though? You and me, going so fast.”

“Probably,” Levi said, his eyes remaining on the road. His voice was low and soothing. “But here we are, anyway.”

Eren sucked in a deep breath, his ribcage expanding, his heart bursting like the sun that shot through the clouds.

“Here we are, anyway,” he said with a smile he couldn't contain.

Again, Eren lolled his head to the side and peered at Levi's profile through the shades. “Sooo...”

“I don't like where this is going.”

“You're my boyfriend, huh?”

“One, I'm too old to be anyone's boyfriend. Two, I only said that to spare you further mortification.”

“One, you are not even near old. And two, as if you would ever do something so nice.”

Levi glanced over, one eyebrow raised. “I didn't say I did it for free.”

Eren dipped his chin enough to look at Levi over the top of the sunglasses. “What did you have in mind?”
A ghost of a smile threatened Levi's lips as he returned his attention to the road. “I'll let you know when I feel like it.”

Eren heaved a sigh and flopped back against the seat. “What a tease.”

“Says you.”

“I'm certainly not a tease.”

“Lying little shit.”

“You've obviously got a seriously perverted mind. It's probably a good thing you're not working for Jesus anymore.”

“Digging your own grave here, brat.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, dude,” Eren said, wondering how far he could cajole and push Levi until he was properly snapped at.

Levi didn't seem to deem that worth a response. Instead, he remained quiet as he approached their driveway and parked, then unbuckled his seatbelt in time with Eren.

But when Eren shifted to exit the car, he found himself completely straddled by Levi's strong, slim thighs. Levi's eyes burned an intense, pale grey, but there was little time to note anything else before Levi was lacing his fingers at Eren's nape and dipping his head to capture Eren's mouth.

“Le-” Eren tried to speak, scrambled to remind them both that they were in the driveway in the middle of broad daylight. But Levi thrust his tongue further between Eren's lips, leaving Eren no choice but to moan and give chase. Levi was grinding against Eren with infuriating, slow rolls of his hips, Levi's hands burying in Eren's hair, keeping him close as Levi destroyed him with that hot, wet mouth and avid tongue and teeth.

Eren was distantly aware that the whimper echoing in his ears was his own, but he couldn't have cared less. His entire world was Levi. His arms wrapped around Levi's waist, clutching him impossibly close as Eren desperately clung on for dear life. The thick, heady scent of Levi's leather jacket and his distinct, earthy flavour was like a drug, and Eren quickly found himself drowning in the way Levi pulled back just enough to cup Eren's jaw and force him to further open his mouth for plundering.

This was a new side of Levi, Eren vaguely realised as his hands crept beneath Levi's shirt, his nails scraping down the delicate skin at the small of his back. This wasn't just bossy Levi, or even impassioned Levi. This was a desperately selfish, demanding Levi who was taking what he wanted because he knew Eren would whole-heartedly give it.

The realisation that Levi trusted Eren enough to just let go with him was all Eren needed to go from zero to sixty in one second flat.

“Shit,” Eren hissed, his hips bucking as Levi ground down on him and ripped at the collar of Eren's shirt, tugging it aside enough to latch his mouth onto a spot just above Eren's collarbone and begin sucking and biting a bruise to life. “Shū, Levi, I -”

Levi firmly gripped Eren's chin and slipped his thumb between Eren's lips to quiet him. Under different circumstances, Eren would have been horrified at the sound of his own guttural moan, but in this instance, all he did was clamp his mouth around Levi's finger and suck, nip, and lick.
Eren didn't know how long it was before Levi slipped his thumb away with a wet pop and leaned in to press his forehead against Eren's. They could have taken five minutes or an hour. Both were panting into each others mouths, sharing breath and stealing a few final kisses with swollen, aching lips.

Levi's face was pink, his mouth a beautiful slick shade of red. His tongue darted out along his bottom lip, as if he were savouring Eren's taste.

“Levi -”

“Recharging my batteries,” Levi rasped, his voice utterly fucked-out.

Eren blinked in surprise and laughed breathlessly. “What're you running on? Your batteries must be ten times the size of mine.”

Despite their cramped space, Levi managed to wrap his arms loosely around Eren’s neck and bring his mouth to Eren's ear in what was the closest thing to a hug he'd ever given Eren.

“I have a lot of lost time to make up for,” Levi murmured. They sat there for a little bit, arms encircling each other, noses buried in the other's necks. And then, just like that, Levi opened Eren's door and nimbly slipped out. He ducked his head to look in, where Eren was just staring into space, wondering if he was dating a secret sex god.

“Oiy, Jaeger, look alive. There's ice cream melting in the back. You're fucking useless.”

With that, Levi was at the trunk, grabbing some groceries.

Mentally shaking himself off, Eren got out of the car on wobbly legs and took several bags, too. This relationship was going to kill him.

“We come with food!” Eren called out as he stomped through the open doorway. “Can someone help unload the car?”

“I got it,” came Jean's voice from the other room. He strode in, sparing Eren a brief glance – and stopping dead in his tracks. “Dude,” he said, his eyes wide.

“What?” Eren said with a scowl.

“Did someone beat the shit out of you or something?”


“Well, either that or you've got serious sex hair going on,” Jean said, his entire face crumpling as if the mere idea of it made his stomach turn.

“You're a piece of shit, Jean. Go and get the groceries,” Eren said, turning on his heel and fucking booking it to the kitchen.


Levi looked out from behind the fridge door with annoyance, “What?”

“Why didn't you tell me I looked like I'd been fucked from here 'til Sunday!”

Levi rolled his eyes. “Please. You're not there yet. Although if that's an invitation -”
“It's – it's not not an invitation, but that's not what I'm talking about right now! Jean totally guessed something happened, okay?”

“So?” Levi rummaged in a bag left on the island and put a few things on the counter.

“So...” Eren frowned. “You... you're saying you don't care if someone finds out about us?”

Levi sighed and looked up, met Eren's worried gaze. “I'm just saying, let's take every day as it comes. There are far more important things to worry about right now.”

Eren had not been expecting Levi to take this so nonchalantly. But actually, it was kind of a relief. Eren could take it one day at a time. If it was Levi, he could definitely do that.

“Okay.” Eren released a long breath and nodded. “Okay.”

That little electric grin of Levi’s returned for a second. “And also I just wanted to watch you freak the fuck out when someone noticed you do look like you'd been fucked from here 'til Sunday.”

Eren's entire face went red. “Dammit, Levi – I knew it!”

Eren was ready to pounce Levi and make him pay in some creative way when the front door slammed shut.

“Uhhh, guys?” said Jean, from across the house. “I think Eren's dad is here.”

Eren felt the blood drain from his face.

Shit.
Chapter 25

So, I fully intend on replying to the comments from the previous two chapters, because I super duper appreciate each and everyone one of you and love that you take the time to speak to me - but I also wanted to get this out ASAP. So, replying for from me tomorrow! Thank you to all readers of this story, both comments, kudos people, and lurkers alike. I'm just so happy to get to share something that not only I personally enjoy, but that so many of you enjoy, too.

ANYWAY, LET'S GO CHAT WITH DADDY DEAREST, SHALL WE?

Dad should have looked different.

Eren hadn't realised it until that moment of stunned silence, but in the couple weeks since he'd last seen his father, not only had Eren's life changed, but he'd changed as a person, too.

And so, seeing his dad looking unaltered – the same glasses, the same tall, thin stature with slumped shoulders and dark hair in a ponytail at the nape of his neck – was a shock to the system. While much of Eren's world had changed, this remained a steadfast. His and Dad's relationship would always be an unfortunate constant. Never diverting from their course of aggravated altercation after altercation.

“Eren,” Dad said, his brow wrinkled as he took a step into the kitchen. “I came as fast as I could. What's happened?”

A roar thundered in Eren's ears, and a thick, red mist descended over his vision like a film of blood. How Eren managed to get across the room so quickly, he hadn't a fucking clue. But he did know that the resounding crack of his fist connecting with his father's face only fuelled his speed and intensity.

“You fucking know what happened!” Eren's voice broke with the raw force of his screaming as he launched himself again at the shocked visage of his dad. “Fucking liar! Piece of shit, cowardly, lowli-”

“Jaeger!”

There were arms of steel around Eren's middle, pinning his arms against his sides. Eren bared his teeth, his eyes, burning and damp, trained on his father.

“Let me the fuck go!” Eren kicked off the floor, pushing hard against Levi's hold, his legs flying up in desperation as he tried to escape. With his hands fisted and nails cutting into his palms, Eren struggled like a rabid dog, but was held firmly against Levi's chest – and promptly shoved to the ground.

The back of Eren's head smacked off the kitchen tiles, his sight going spotty as he growled and tried to rear up again. But a hefty, heavy Doc Martin boot crushed flat against his sternum and Eren was effectively pinned by a guy half his fucking size.

Eren futilely struggled for a little while, until the knowledge that he wasn't going anywhere slowly
seeped in. His vision began to clear as he blinked up at the looming figure of Levi, looking down at him with an expression like deadly black ice.

It was then that Eren noticed the silence that had descended. Swallowing hard, his breath coming in slower and slower pants, Eren's gaze flashed around the room. Not only was Dad gawking at him with one hand pressed against his cheek, but Mikasa and Jean were standing in the entryway with twin stupefied looks.

Levi's voice was sharp and detached, a blade slicing through the thick skin of tension.

“We can do this all day, Jaeger. I've needed a little extracurricular activity, anyway.”

Eren met Levi's cold stare with a fiery glare.

“Let me up,” Eren said, his voice just shy of trembling with the anger that boiled and spat under his skin.

“You don't get to make that decision,” Levi said, looking deceptively bored as he glanced over his shoulder at Eren's dad. “We haven't been properly introduced,” Levi said dryly. “I'm Levi. I run this house with Father Smith.”

Dad's attention flicked from Levi's face, to where his boot crushed his son into the ground, and back. “Um, it's a pleasure to finally meet you. I've heard many good things about you over the years. I'm -”

“I know who you are.”

Dad blinked. “Excuse me for saying so, but you don't seem like a priest.”

“And you don't seem like much of a father,” Levi said evenly. “Don't bother excusing me. I don't care.”

Dad's face went still, expressionless - like he did when he mentally removed himself from the situation. It was one of the things Eren hated most about him. How he could just extract his feelings and live a hollow existence out of his own choice. Eren could never do that - could never let go.

“So, you know,” Dad said mechanically.

“We know,” Eren said from the floor, desperately attempting to choke back his temper. Once uncaged, it was so fucking difficult for him lock up the spite and bile that threatened his tongue.

“What do we know?” Jean said, earning an elbow to the gut from Mikasa.

“We found the tape,” Eren said, his voice hollow. He stared up at the ceiling, his fingers unclenching as a wave of sorrow washed over him, choking up his lungs, his throat. He remembered what he'd said to Levi in the car several days ago - although it felt like years, now.

“I was wondering if my dad actually loves me at all. After what I did... If I was him, I'd never forgive me.”

“What tape did we find?” Jean said, grunting as Mikasa wrapped her arm around his neck and promptly dragged him out of the room.

“Eren,” Dad said quietly, sounding pained. “I'm sorry. I never wanted you to know.”

“Which part?” Eren said, his voice breaking. He continued to concentrate on the ceiling. “That I
always had a gift? That you played with Mom's life? That I'm a murderer?"

"You're not," Dad said, his footsteps rushing nearer to them. “No, God, you're not, Eren. I just…”

"Again, you fucking liar!" Eren finally whipped his head to glower up at his father. “I heard you say it – you said it! You said, Eren, what did you do!"

Suddenly, the weight from Eren's chest was relieved, and Levi was crouching beside him, his arms folded on his knees as he silently considered Eren. Levi no longer appeared as detached, and his tone cradled the softest inclination of concern.

“You need to have this conversation privately.”

The look Eren shared with Levi was intimate, the silence extending between them anything but empty. Gingerly, Eren sat up and rubbed the back of his head, his brow furrowed as he frowned deeply at the ground. He ached everywhere, and not just from the minor beatdown Levi had set upon him.

Levi held out a hand to Eren, who stared at it quizzically, before clasping it. Together, they helped each other stand in tandem, their palms quickly parting afterwards.

Eren shoved his hands in the pockets of his hoody, refusing to make eye contact with his father.

“Come on,” was all Eren said as he turned and headed in the direction of the library.

Before they'd left the room, Levi said, “I'm calling Erwin.”

So, this was the beginning.

***

The moment Eren's father shut the library door behind them, Eren lost the words to express anything he wanted to say. His emotions were tangled painfully at the back of his throat like barbed wire, puncturing him, drawing blood, and threatening to rip out his tongue if he attempted to voice them.

“Eren, tell me what's going on,” Dad said, openly approaching him as if he wasn't nervous of getting another shiner to match the rapidly darkening bruise on his cheekbone.

“What, you mean keep you in the loop the same way you've been doing with me all my life?” Eren said sourly. He wrapped his arms around himself, gripping his elbows as he wandered behind the desk to peer out of the window.

“I won't apologise for the choices I've made as a parent.”

That ripped a harsh laugh from Eren. “I've never heard you genuinely apologise for a single thing in your life. Wouldn't expect you to start now.”

“So what do you want from me, then? I can't help you if I don't know what's going on.”

“I want information,” Eren said, turning sharply and leaning against the window pane. He met his father's gaze levelly, and inclined his chin in a challenge. “I want to know everything you know. And then maybe I can let you in on my side of things.”

“Eren -”

“It's an equal trade of knowledge, right? For once I know something you don't know. How's it feel,
“None of that matters, Eren! Christ, when you called me you said something – her – you said she was in you? What the hell are you talking about? I'm speaking to you plain as day and I don't see any signs of possession.”

“Did you see any in Mom?” Eren asked quietly, his jaw clenching as he watched Dad's eyes widen.

Dad shook his head, his hands hanging uselessly at his sides. “I was never home enough. I never knew until it was too late. It was – it was all my fault.”

“Yeah,” Eren said, catching his father's gaze and drilling him with every ounce of rage left in him. “It was all your fault.”

They stared each other down for a second, before Eren shifted against the windowsill and leaned his temple against the cool glass. As he stared outside, a shimmer of his own reflection looking back at him, and he barely recognised it as himself.

“Although,” Eren said softly, his heart curling in on itself, struggling to make itself smaller until nothing could find it to hurt it anymore, “You may have been the one to start it off, I'm the one who finished it.”

“No one knew you could do that, Eren. No one blames -”

“I was always so proud that I was like Mom, y'know?” Eren said, disgusted with the crack in his voice and the tears that threatened behind his eyes. He'd called his father a coward, but Eren couldn't even look him in the fucking face while he spoke. “That was the one thing that I felt good about. That I looked like her, smiled like her. But in the end, you and I are more the same than anything.”

Eren turned. “We're both murderers.”

Dad rushed towards him and stopped at the other side of the desk. Eren couldn't remember the last time he'd seen him so panicked.

“You can't think like that, Eren. Please, please don't. Carla and I knew you had a gift – she had it too, but not anywhere near your level -”

“What?” Eren's brows knit together. “Mom was like me?”

“She paled in comparison to you, buddy,” Dad said, his expression softening. “You were amazing.”

“So why the hell don't I remember anything, then?” Eren demanded, pushing from the window to grip the highback chair behind the desk.

“The mind is a powerful thing,” Dad said somberly. “There are some things I can't explain.”

“Fuck that,” Eren spat, slumping forward a little against the back of the chair. He was suddenly so, so tired. The adrenaline he'd ridden in on was seeping from every pore, leaving him a hollow husk. There was so much more to talk about, but Eren was both too frightened and too exhausted to wade through all of the skeletons in their closet at this specific moment.

“Eren,” Dad said, sounding old and run-down – older than his years. His skin was so pale, and if Eren looked hard enough he noted a few slivers of gray at his temples. When was the last time Eren had ever really looked at his father?
“I’m so sorry this happened to you. To us. I’d never wish this life on our child, and neither would Carla. But you need to tell me what’s going on. It’s imperative that I -”

“You can fucking wait,” Eren snapped. “Wait until we get you and Father Erwin in the same room. We’ve got a lot to rehash. And then it'll be my turn to talk. And for once in your fucking life, you're actually going to pay attention to what I have to say.”

Before Dad could make a fool of himself by even pretending he’d ever given Eren more than a passing hour of attention in their years trapped in the same house, Eren swept by him and bolted for the door. He yanked on the handle, pausing with wide eyes in the entryway when he came face to face with Levi, who’d been leaning on the wall opposite the door.

Levi stood to attention, looking almost caught off guard for a second and a little sheepish to be watching over the room. Maybe he’d been waiting for more sounds of an altercation that he’d have to break up. Who the hell knew what was ever going on in Levi's head.

Eren didn’t even meet Levi’s eyes. He just muttered, “Need air,” and hastily marched past him.

“You!”

The back door was closest. Eren practically threw himself out onto the patio, and literally broke into a run as he rounded the side of the house. He didn't want Levi, his dad, anyone. He wanted to be alone. He was good alone, he could deal with alone because alone was a variable he knew and understood and trusted. You couldn't say the wrong thing or hurt someone or be embarrassed to cry when no one was there.

Eren sucked in sharp, sick breaths as his feet found pavement. Hands fist at his pockets, one hand curled around the cellphone that was now vibrating wildly in his palm, Eren walked.

And he walked. And walked.

The suburbs were starting to fade past Eren's periphery, and it was only when he realised he didn't know where the hell he was that he paused. He looked around, huffing a sigh of relief when he noticed a park. Making a beeline for the swings, Eren flopped onto a seat and was thankful that the place was empty.

Eren stared his feet and kicked a few pebbles. The wind fluffed at his hair, his bangs tickling his damp cheeks. Frowning, Eren brought fingertips to his face and found them wet. The realisation had a hiccup and a gasp of air grabbing him by the throat, right before Eren broke.

The tears burned hot and angry towards his lips, his chin, staining the knees of his jeans. Eren gripped the cold iron links of the swing ropes to keep from collapsing to his knees as a sob pierced his heart and jerked him forward. He tucked his chin in, his hair a curtain around him as he let the open-mouthed sobs consume him, wave after wave.

“Mom,” he managed, panting hard around the word that he never had the benefit of saying out loud for very long in his life. “Mom, are you around? Shit.”

Eren sucked in a sharp, shuddering breath and tilted his head back. With the sleeve of his hoody, he roughly scraped at his tears.

“I could use some – some help. I’m scared and I – I don't know how to be strong. Angry isn't strong, it's fucking weak, and that's all I know. That's all...” Eren snuffled against his sleeve and swallowed
hard against the next barrage that threatened his defences.

“What the hell good is this fucking shitty gift if I can't talk to the one fucking person that matters?

Eren stood, his weak knees going ignored as he clenched his teeth against the tears. He didn't want to fucking cry anymore. He didn't want to run, either, but look where he was now. Would Levi run like this? Fucking no way he would. Would his dad run? Unmistakably.

Well, Eren was sick of being someone he hated. He'd put forth such an effort after high school to be someone he liked, even a little. And it had kind of worked. But things were different now. His life wasn't the one it once was, and Eren had to adapt to that.

And he couldn't sit around like a fucking child and cry about it all day long.

Speaking of the day, Eren looked up, noticing the heavy sun falling behind the rows of cookie cutter houses.

Wondering how long he'd been away, Eren slipped his phone from his pocket for the first time since he'd walked out and unlocked the screen. Seven missed calls from Levi, two from Mikasa, one from Jean. One from Hanji. Eren actually croaked out a laugh a that one.

There were texts too, but just from Levi.

answer your fuvkn phhne

where are tou

you

fuck

WHERE ARE YOU

you little shit don't do anything stupid

call me when you're ready

ok jaeger get a fucking hold of yourself now i'm fresh outta patience and now i'm just gonna kick your scrawny assignments

ASSIGNMENT

ASS

WHAT THE FUCK AUTOCORRECT I'M GOING TO FUCKING SMASH THIS PHONE TO SMITHERINES ON MY GODDAMN FOREHEAD DON'T BOTHER TRYING TO CALL ME ON IT ANYMORE JUST ROT FOR ALL I CARE JESUS FUCKING CHRIST

Eren didn't realise he was laughing until he was doubled over with it. He clenched at his stomach and wiped at tears of mirth, glancing back at the texts over and over, howling anew at the slow decent from genuine concern, to violent coercion, to madness.

For the first time, Eren kind of realised that alone was a pretty shitty option when he had Levi. How many people could say they had Levi, of all people, on their side? Not only on Eren's side, but maybe even a little devoted to him, if Eren was being hopeful.
And Eren was throwing that all away for what? To cry alone? He’d cried in front of Levi before and it had been an experience that ended in comfort and kindness. Why turn that away if it was always there?

Levi had been literally waiting for Eren outside of the door. How many people would he do that for?

With a stupid smile on his face, Eren dialled.

Levi picked up after half of the first ring.

“For the first time in my life I feel the need to reprimand someone using their full name, but as I don’t know your middle name—”

“It’s Mavi,” Eren said with a laugh, starting to walk back towards the way he came.

“What the fuck kind of name is that?”

“Shut up, it’s Turkish—my Mom’s dad’s name. It means ‘blue’. My first name is spelled the Turkish way too, y’know.”

“Wow, today is just a day of fucking revelations.”

“What’s your middle name?”

“It’s Danger. My middle name is Danger, so you better be fucking careful for the rest of your life or you will be in danger of me committing the perfect crime. No one will ever find your body.”

“Uh huh,” Eren said, knowing his smile was evident in his voice. “So when are you coming to pick me up, Father Danger?”

“Do you even know where you are?”

“Uhuh.” Eren looked around. “I’ll just... check my GPS and text you the place, okay?”

There was a long sigh on the other end, then a clipped, “Fine,” and Levi hung up on him.

Eren couldn’t help but grin to himself as he sent Levi his location and waited. He felt stupid for overreacting so strongly to his father, but he supposed what was done was done. He could only move forward and try to deal with things in a way that wasn’t his usual hit people, scream, cry.

So, basically, in a way that wasn’t like a hormonal teenager.

Eren could hear Levi long before he saw him. Squealing tires and a revving engine were kind of his trademark, after all.

Stepping closer to the road, Eren, leaned against a stop sign, trying to look nonchalant as Levi came around the corner and screeched to a halt beside him.

Opening the passenger door, Eren ducked his head and looked in with a sheepish smile in place.

“Hey.”

Levi shot him a glare. “You walked a long way.”

“Yeah... I wasn’t really thinking,” Eren said as he slid beside Levi and slammed the door.
“No shit.”

“Well -”

Eren was cut off as firm, cool fingers reached out and gripped Eren's chin, roughly twisting him to look at Levi.

With his mouth in a sober line, Levi's eyes raked sharply across Eren's face, Levi's thumb very subtly brushing the line of Eren's jaw.

“Crying,” Levi said curtly.

Eren felt his face burn, his lashes lowering as he looked down at Levi's hand instead of meeting his scrutinising gaze.

“I'm not now, though, so whatever.”

“Don't cry alone,” Levi said, so crisply and matter of factly that Eren could barely equate the words with the person saying them. “It's stupid. If you need to cry, find me.”

“I – um.” Eren looked everywhere but Levi. He gulped, leaning into Levi's hand a little, now that it had warmed against Eren's skin. When Eren finally did peer up, he caught the flash of an expression he'd never seen before.

Levi's eyebrows furrowed, his mouth in a frown, his eyes a deep, twilight blue-grey, utterly unguarded with worry shining through them like stars.

“Yeah,” Eren said breathlessly, falling fast. “Okay. I'll find you.”

“Always?”

“Always.”

Levi searched Eren's expression for a second longer, then dropped his hand and nodded. With that, he revved the engine back to life and sped off.

Silence surrounded them both, but Eren had a feeling both of their hearts were like thunder in their ears.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Sooo, this chapter is hella short. The reason for this is because the next chapter is a WHOPPER. I'm already partially through it, but when I realised what a monster it would be, I went for posting the 'set up' bit now, and in a couple days time you'll have the follow-through.

Next chapter, I'm also going to include all of the fanart in the notes. Just... wow, guys. So many of you are ridiculously talented and generous.

Anyway, on with the show!

“Hey,” Eren said as he stepped into the living room and found Dad, Father Erwin, and Hanji speaking in lowered voices.

Eren found himself pinned by three pairs of eyes, not to mention Levi’s at his back.

“Eren,” Dad said, shifting as if he were about to stand, then thought better of it. “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” Eren said with a shrug. What else was he supposed to say? Eren was ashamed for how he'd acted. Not for punching his dad, necessarily, or for generally being angry – but for handling everything without an ounce of self control. He thought he’d gotten past that over the years. Turned out, that shit never really went away – it was a constant source of self improvement.

Father Erwin stood, his height and stature naturally commanding the room. “Then, I suggest we all move to the library for a more private discussion.”

“Wait,” Levi said, moving to stand beside Eren, a minor but heartening show of solidarity for Eren. “We’ll meet you there. We need to take care of something, first.”

Father Erwin merely nodded and didn’t question Levi for a second. Eren reminded himself that the two of them, plus Hanji, had been close friends for a hell of a long time. They must trust each other intrinsically at this point. It was nice to think that Levi had people like that in his life – people that would take care of him. Fuck knew Eren wasn’t of much use to Levi at this point. Eren just ran away and cried about his problems until Levi saved him.

Eren numbly watched everyone evacuate the room and head for the opposite side of the house. He frowned at Levi.

“What do we have to take care of?”

“You need to eat,” was all Levi said, already turning and heading for the kitchen.

Rubbing his lips together to keep himself from smiling, Eren fell in step with Levi. “I'd argue that I'm not exactly starving at a time like this, but I have a feeling -”

“Your feeling is right.”
Eren was going to say something in reply, but that went out the window as his smile broke out at the sight of Annie with her head shoved in the open fridge. She had the house phone lodged in the crook of her neck and shoulder, and every so often murmured, “uh huh”. She looked like a normal high school senior, and it bolstered Eren’s heart to recall that he had something to do with her current health of body and mind. He was good for something – he really was.

With a grin, Eren peeked over Annie’s shoulder and grabbed the soda she was holding, only snickering further when she promptly elbowed him in the gut and snatched her drink back with a glare. He gave a mock frown and bumped her hip with his own, shoving her away from the fridge to search for something quick to shove down his throat.

“Well, that’s not your problem,” Annie said into the phone, as she grabbed a family sized bag of pretzels from a cupboard. “You have to take care of yourself first before you worry about other peoples’ shit.”

Eren grabbed a tupperware container of chicken salad and slid it onto the counter, smiling to himself with his back to Levi.

“I think she’s probably the sanest person in this house.”

“We agree on something,” Levi said put the kettle on the hob to heat.

They both went about their business, Eren putting away the bread and tupperware after he’d made his sandwich, and Levi settling at the island with his tea. Without fanfare, Eren started basically inhaling his food, wanting to rush into what was coming sooner than later.

“Don’t choke,” Levi said, taking a careful sip from his mug.

“I don’t remember you ever drinking coffee.”

“I don’t, usually,” Levi said, eyeing him with a flicked eyebrow, as if he thought Eren was being particularly weird. “If you’ve really gotta be fucking nosey about it, caffeine makes me run my mouth. It's not really good for anyone in my near vicinity.”

Eren boggled, then laughed loudly, his shoulders shaking as it tapered off. “What? Are you saying coffee makes you hyper and being hyper makes you even more of an asshole?”

“Something like that,” Levi said dryly, not looking pleased with the turn of the conversation.

Eren finished his food quickly and sighed as he stared down at his empty plate. He looked up, meeting Levi’s guarded expression.

“What do you think's gonna happen in there?” Eren said quietly.

“For once,” Levi said with a displeased down-turned mouth, “your guess is as good as mine.”

Without giving it thought, Eren reached across the table and gripped Levi’s wrist. He turned Levi’s hand in his own, then spread his fingers, lacing them with Levi’s pale ones. Studying their interlocked hands, Eren sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it. When the hand he was holding lightly squeezed, Eren flicked his gaze up, a little surprised.

Levi cocked his head slightly. "Recharging?"

Despite everything, Eren felt a smile bloom. "Yeah."
Everyone had silently settled in. Eren in one leather chair, Hanji in the one across from him, Father Erwin behind his desk, Levi leaning against the lip of the desk, and Dad standing stiffly before them all with his arms folded.

Dad was the first to speak, his voice hard as he considered Eren. “Erwin informed me that you’ve been helping with exorcisms.”

Eren flicked an annoyed look to Father Erwin, then back to his dad. “Less helped. More like did them my own way.”

“I gathered,” Dad said icily. “I shouldn’t have to tell you how dangerous and reckless that is, Eren.”

“So, don’t. Father Erwin and Hanji obviously thought I was capable enough to do it.”

“Well,” Hanji said with a smile and a cheerful shrug, “Not exactly. It was more like experimenting. We weren’t going to know what you could do until you did it.”

“You shouldn’t be able to accomplish anything like that at all, Eren!” Dad burst out, his pale face colouring, dark eyes flashing towards Father Erwin, burning into him. “How did this happen?”

“Wait,” Eren said, his nails digging into the arms of his chair. “What the hell do you mean by that? How should I not be able to if I’ve always had this?”

“Because I hid it, dammit,” Dad said sharply, then gestured clumsily between Father Erwin and himself. “We hid it. Your abilities, your memories. So you’d never have to go through this again. And so the church wouldn’t exploit you for it’s own needs.”

The air rushed from Eren's lungs in a great punch of shock. He openly gawked, his eyes wide as he frantically looked between his father, who just looked angry, to Father Erwin, who actually sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

“What -” Eren finally managed breathlessly. “I mean, how -”

“Grisha,” Father Erwin said placidly, although there was a underlying steel to his voice that reflected his current frustration. “Allow me to take over for a time. Collect your thoughts.”

Eren swallowed a hysterical bark of laughter. Father Erwin was basically telling his dad to chill the fuck out. What the hell was this world Eren was living in?

“I -” Dad paused and shook his head, his shoulders sagging as he waved Father Erwin off. He wouldn’t look at Eren. “Fine. Yes, fine.”

“Good.” Father Erwin folded his large hands atop the desk and shifted in his seat enough to fully face Eren. His expression was gentle, even if his gaze was high-walled and unreadable. He and Levi seemed to have that in common.

“While I wouldn’t have condoned your father sharing with you what he just has – simply because it adds more unnecessary drama to the situation – it's out now and you deserve a proper explanation.”

“No shit,” Eren said, raising one eyebrow with an acidic expression he'd learned from Levi. At this point, Eren wasn't scared of back-talking Father Erwin. Hell, Eren could basically kill demons with his bare hands. He could handle a huge, intimidating man of God.
Despite Eren's heart slamming like a wrecking ball against his ribs, he leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, his attention unyielding on Father Erwin. “Ready.”

Father Erwin took a quiet breath, his gaze lowering for a second, as if collecting his thoughts.

“Due to my close work with your father over the years, I'd been aware, via Grisha, of your talents. It was nothing either of us had previously put much thought into, as it had nothing to do with our day to day duties within the church.

“After the failed exorcism, however... It became clear that your gifts surpassed mere minor clairvoyance. At only ten years old, you displayed a skill so unheard of that the church has seen no signs of it for generations. Unfortunately, the discovery of your abilities coincided with the death of your mother. We were all in a state of shock – but you, understandably, the most.”

Dad cut in, his voice having returned to it's level, scientific coolness. He was leaning against a bookcase, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his corduroy pants, his gaze fallen to his feet.

“Afterwards, you were inconsolable. Not in an average, grief-stricken way, but like an injured, wild animal. Something had – something had snapped, and all I wanted for you – more than anything, I just wanted you to be okay. I would have done anything to make you okay.”

“And he did,” Father Erwin said. “We did. You may recall seeing a therapist from that point on -”

“Only vaguely,” Eren said, surprised he could even speak at this point. Confusion and anger had cuffed him, left him feeling weak and prone and anxious.

“He was a hypnotherapist. One particularly skilled, and with a little bit of a gift, himself. He works closely with the church, helping to heal the minds of those traumatised by their own exorcisms. You were his toughest patient. Not because we'd hoped to erase your trauma, including the circumstances surrounding the upset, but because Grisha requested your gift be -” Father Erwin have a short shrug, as if he couldn't find an eloquent word for what he was attempting to say, “Eliminated.”

Eren frowned deeply, his eyebrows scrunching. “You can't just eliminate a gift. I'm living proof.”

“But it had worked up until now,” Dad said, pushing off the bookcase and starting a quick pace along the expensive floor rug. Frustration tightened and quickened his speech, like bullets. “I can't quite grasp why. It had to have been the exorcism, but how? It's not as if your memories returned – just the gift broke through. What did it?”

“Wrong question.” Levi spoke for the first time, toneless and direct.

“Levi?” Father Erwin said, looking to him, patiently waiting.

“The question is: who did it?”

A nerve pinched and screamed within Eren, and he flinched. Swallowing, Eren roughly said, “Lilith.”

Once again, the room's eyes were on Eren.

“Eren,” Dad said slowly, catching his nervous gaze. “What is all this about? The phone call.”

“There are...” Eren looked around, briefly chewing on his bottom lip as he struggled for the right words. He didn't want to ramble. “There are things I haven't told everyone. I’ve been hearing voices in my sleep. Well, one voice – a woman. I've saved on my phone the things I remember her saying,
but it sounds like some kind of, I dunno, chant or important words. Not just everyday chatter. She talks to me almost every night, unless I'm extremely exhausted.

“There's also a darkness accumulating around me.” Eren heard his father suck in a sharp breath, but didn't look at him. “On more than one occasion, and by more than one entity, I've been made aware of a black energy surrounding my shoulders and head. It's growing. As it grows stronger, so does the woman's voice. And so does a ringing in my ears, which sometimes can last up to a half hour straight. It's become so regular that I've just begun to ignore it.”

“Ringing in your ears?” Hanji said, her voice a little alarmed, surprising Eren. For once, he'd forgotten she was in the room. “That's a rare symptom of possession, Eren. It's been described as the Devil whispering in your ears, but the ringing is the only way your brain can process his voice. But it quickly follows a full-on abduction of the senses by the entity. You're still walking.”

“Maybe that's what she wants,” Eren said quietly, unable to ignore Levi now. He sneaked a look towards the desk and found Levi's eyes. Although Levi made no obvious hint of worry or comfort, just looking his soothing, sturdy visage had Eren releasing a calming breath. He surveyed the rest of the silent room.

“I just... I get the feeling she likes me.”

“There's no way to be sure of any of this,” Father Erwin said, a tinge of remorse deepening his words. He looked a little sad for Eren, for all things.

For a time, everyone lost themselves in their own thoughts. Eren was stabbing at his memories, desperately attempting to rip open a gap, a place where he could find the memories so expertly hidden. If he thought about it with a clear mind, he could see his father's perspective. No average parent would ever be faced with the decisions Dad had been forced to make – and he'd done the best with what he could. But he'd lied about so much, it didn't seem possible right now to just sweep it all under the rug.

“Why don't we ask her?”

Eren shot a look to his father, his eyes widening.


Dad appeared composed now, a scientist once more. He cleared his throat and said, louder, “We don't know anything about her. So why don't we ask her.”

“How the hell would you expect to do that, Doctor?” Levi said crisply, his eyes cutting across the room with sudden and obvious distaste.

With that, Dad stared at Eren.

“Son, we're going to have to put you under.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

WOW, OKAY. It's been a while. You can egg my house.

But I bring a DOUBLE CHAPTER SPECIAL?! Actually, it's only a double chapter because this bit ended up being 9.3k and I felt like it needed to be divided. Because reasons.

I um... these two chapters are highly dramatic and I don't get to add much of my "trademark" humour (I use this term loosely LOL). But I really hope you enjoy it. And that it doesn't bore you. God, please don't be bored.

“What?” said Eren and Levi, in tandem. They both exchanged a quick glance, while Hanji said, “Ooooh, I like it”, and Father Erwin pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“That's epically stupid and reckless,” Levi said, his eyes pale and arctic. “Reckless with your own kid's life.”

“The proposal has merit,” Father Erwin said, before Dad could reply.

If Levi's stare could cut, Father Erwin would be in bloody shreds on the floor. “You just want to pick the brain of the only demon that ever bested you.”

Father Erwin raised his eyebrows at Levi, and actually looked like he'd laugh for a second. “Levi. You know me. Something like that falls far down the list. First off, even Eren admits to knowing very little about Lilith. You and I, of course, have touched on her in college textbooks, but who even knows if this is the one and same.”

Pausing, Father Erwin folded his hands atop the desk and shifted to address the room. “There is one thing of which we're all positive. This entity is powerful. Lilith withstood three consecutive exorcism attempts, and even when Eren had pulled her out of the vessel, she still had the energy to remain on this plain. Whether she is indeed possessing Eren, or something else altogether, we don't know. Perhaps if we speak with her, we can learn her motives, her reasoning – if there is any. And, if we're lucky, we can gather information from her on how she has managed to remain with Eren. If we can figure out how she's attached to him, we maybe be able to figure how to detach her.”

Silence cloaked the room, heavy and dark as the realisation of reality settled over their shoulders.

Eren took a deep breath and looked to Father Erwin. “Let's do it.”

“Don't you fucking -” Levi snapped his mouth shut, his eyebrows knotting tightly towards each other, his own surprise flashing briefly across his sharp features. “Do you realise to what you're agreeing, Jaeger?”

“Not one-hundred percent,” Eren said with a small shrug. “But if I'm going to trust anyone to help me take care of this, it's gonna be you guys, right?”

“That trust's gonna get you killed, one day,” Levi said under his breath, but Father Erwin was
already speaking over his grumblings.

“We won't be going through the entire process of a traditional exorcism, Eren. Usually, within the first few prayers, the entity reveals itself. Average demons aren't particularly intelligent and simply spit sacrilegious venom, and we ignore them and continue forth. In this case, we would stop and question her. Does that sound like something you'd be willing to do?”

When Eren hesitated, Father Erwin said, “This is new ground for us, too, Eren. We will tread with extreme caution. None of us want you hurt. You're a great asset to us all.”

Eren nodded faintly as he chewed on the inside of his cheek in thought. “How is that going to end, though?”

Silence prevailed. Eren shifted in his seat, the old leather beneath him creaking and grating his frayed nerves. His pulse thrummed at his temples, pushed in at his skull and threatened a brewing headache. Across from him, Hanji looked in deep, fierce thought, frowning over Eren’s shoulder at nothing. Levi had a hip on the desk, his arms folded casually, but his jaw flexed as he ground his teeth and glowered at everyone in the room. Father Erwin had steepled his fingers in front of his mouth as he quietly considered Eren's dad.

“I mean,” Eren said, purposely edging some steel behind his voice and straightening his spine, “We can't go into this without an exit strategy. But this is your profession, not mine – yet – and you have shitloads of experience between you all. So, what do we do?”

Dad was the first to speak up.

“If Lilith reacts in your body similarly to how she did in – in your mother, then it'll be impossible for us to fully exorcise her the first time around, anyway. She'll retreat back, to gather energy.”

“So,” Levi said with a barely repressed sneer, “You're gonna throw everything you can at the kid and hope it exhausts her enough that she retreats.”

“Essentially.”

“And leave Eren in what kind of state, Doctor?”

“I'll be okay,” Eren said hastily. Everyone looked to him expectantly. He cleared his throat. “Uh, relatively. But listen – Lilith doesn't want me dead or whatev-”

“That's true,” Hanji said, jumping in eagerly. “Assuming that Lilith has been lurking in Eren all of this time without making a real move, we can at least hypothesise that she doesn't want Eren gone. Certainly not his body. If we start roughing him up -”

“Are you fucking kidding me,” Levi said, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“If we start roughing Eren up,” Hanji said pointedly, “Lilith is going to want to slink away until Eren regains some kind of physical strength.”

“Maybe,” Levi said, dropping his hand, where it fisted at his thigh.

“Maybe,” Hanji said. She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs, one ankle resting on her knee, her posture relaxed. “Like Erwin said – it's not as if any of us want to hurt Eren. But this isn't going to be a walk in the park. And if we go into a real exorcism blind, like with Carla Jaeger, than it's safe to say we'd be in serious trouble.”
Even Levi didn't have a comeback for that. Given the colour in his cheeks and the spark in his eye as he burned his stare into Eren, Levi was inwardly raging. But Eren realised that this conversation had led to one realisation for all of them: they had limited options and, possibly, limited time.

“So, let's do this thing,” Eren said, struggling to keep his voice from wavering. He wouldn't show fear now, not when he needed to put on his best face for everyone. They were depending on him to be strong just as much as he was depending on them to put their all into helping him.

“Let's schedule this for tomorrow morning,” Father Erwin said, shifting just enough to lean his head against the high-backed desk chair. His mountainous shoulders sagged just a little, reminding Eren that the guy wasn't actually made of stone. “It's been a long and exhausting day for everyone.”

Dad nodded. “I agree. I need to go home and gather some preparations, anyway.”

Eren wasn't sure if he was frustrated or relieved. On one hand, he wanted to get it over with. On the other, he was fucking terrified of what was to come. So, he just nodded and remained where he was.

Hanji stood and cracked her neck from side to side, puffing out a breath of relief. “Cool by me. Reconvene bright and early?”

Father Erwin just nodded, not moving from his spot. “Eren, would you see your father out? Levi, stay.”

Much to Eren's shock, Levi nodded obediently, not looking at all bothered at being ordered around. Apparently Father Erwin was the only one allowed to tell him what to do without repercussion.

Despite Eren's intense curiosity over what Father Erwin would have to say to Levi without Eren being there, he got to his feet and motion for his father to follow. Hanji swept past them in the hallway, claiming she was grabbing food from the kitchen before heading home, because she didn't want to cook anything. Eren led his dad outside to the front porch.

The outdoor light flicked on, flooding the night with a patch of yellow. A light spray of drizzle filmed over the both of them, clinging to his father's glasses as they eyed each other wearily.

“You're nearly taller than me,” Dad said, a ghost of a smile at his lips.

Eren's eyebrows shot up as he stared, taken aback by the sudden shift in topic. “Um. I guess so. I haven't noticed.”

“We're never standing close enough for long enough to notice.”

“Who's fault is that?” Eren bit down on his tongue and looked away. “Sorry.”

“It's alright, bud.” Dad reached out, his hand flinching for a moment as he was unsure he should continue the movement. When Eren didn't duck away, Dad gave a small smile and firmly gripped Eren's arm, giving it a quick rub. “We'll take care of this tomorrow. Or, at least begin to. I won't fail you, Eren, okay? Not like I did your mom.”

“We both failed her,” Eren said softly. They each fell into their own thoughts, the shimmering clouds of rain softly tickling at Eren's cheeks, slowly but surely soaking his hair.

“We have a lot to talk about,” Dad said, finally.

Eren looked up and met his father's eyes. They really didn't look alike at all. Except maybe for their twin expressions of regret.
“Yeah,” Eren said uselessly. “Later.”


“’Night, Dad.”

Eren remained on the porch, not waving as his father's car backed out of the drive, but not looking away either.

What a fucking day this had been. In some respects, Eren was beginning to feel older than his years. It was also dawning on him how trying this line of work could be. Not just being a priest or an exorcist. Simply working with such unstable matter – the paranormal – left no room for stark black and white. Everything was grey, everything was fog and uncertainty and confusion.

What had Armin called him?

A lighthouse.

If Eren could be a lighthouse in this fog, that would make everything worth it. If he could rid himself of Lilith and pursue his gift, use it for something that would make a difference in the world, then it didn't matter how painful the profession. Eren would be an exorcist.

“The fuck you doing?” Levi's voice came from behind.

Eren jumped a little and turned, a self-conscious smile on his face. “Um, just thinking.”

“In the rain?” Levi stepped out into the drizzle and made a face of disgust. “Christ, you're soaked. You've been standing out here all this time? Get your ass inside, fuckwit.”

“Dude, I'm not gonna get pneumonia from a little rain,” Eren said, even as he complacently went inside and kicked off his wet shoes on the inner welcome mat.

“I wouldn't put it past you,” Levi said darkly, heeling off his own shoes and setting them neatly aside. He stood and gripped Eren's wrist with a frown. “You're fucking freezing. What the hell is wrong with your brain? Do you have a brain?”

“I-”

“Come on.” Levi was already dragging him through the house. “You're showering and then bed.”

“Bossy bossy,” Eren mumbled, but had to bite back a smile. Levi cared. It was cute.

“You can only take the homeless look so far.”

“I do not look homeless!” Eren allowed himself to be shoved into the bathroom across from Levi's bedroom.

Levi followed and flicked on the lights, closed the door behind him, and flicked the lock with a resounding click.

“Have you looked at yourself lately?”

Eren glanced at the large mirror that dominated one wall with double sinks. His hair really was getting shaggy. His bangs reached his nose in wet spikes that clung to his forehead and temples. He'd tied his hair half up, and the remainder of it was plastered to the nape of his neck. His hoody was littered with tiny holes from years and years of use, and the weekend at the lake had left Eren baked
brown enough to indeed look like a surfer douchebag that Mikasa had mentioned.

“Hey,” Eren said with a shrug as he looked away. “People don't scream when they see me. Good enough for me.”

Levi's mouth twitched, but shortly after he was heaving one of his usual put-upon sighs and coming at Eren. He snatched the zip of Eren's hoody and yanked it down.

“Idiot, get in the shower.”

“Uh.” Eren allowed Levi to shove the hoody off his shoulders, coercing it off his wrists until it fell to the floor. “Not that I'm complaining, but is there a reason you're in here with me?”

“Isn't it obvious?” Levi said crisply, already working at the buttons of Eren's low slung jeans.

“Okay, um -“ Eren swallowed, unable to stop himself from eagerly stripping off his own shirt and flinging it in a random direction. “Can I –  Jesus.”

Levi was on his knees, tugging Eren's jeans and boxers away, coaxing him to step out of his clothes. Eren followed Levi's lead, even letting Levi roll his socks off.

“Can I ask what you and F-Father Erwin were talking about?”

Levi stood and was quickly and concisely unbuttoning his dress shirt. Eren dimly realised that while he'd been gone, Levi must have changed from his casual clothes back to what was essentially his work attire. As the crisp white shirt peeled away to expose striking tattoos and artfully cut muscle, Eren couldn't be sure if he was more turned on by Levi's leather jackets and big boots or his fitted suits.

Whatever. Levi without anything on was the best look.

“You,” Levi said, almost offhandedly as he kicked off the rest of his clothes with surprising urgency. He swept past a gawking Eren and turned on the shower, looking over one inked shoulder to raise an eyebrow. “What.”

“Just – why me?” Eren was almost regretting starting a conversation. He was becoming seriously distracted with the perfect, tight shape of Levi's bare ass.

“It doesn't matter,” Levi said, reaching a hand into the shower to check the temperature. Steam was already rising, and he fully shoved aside the curtain to step in. “Coming?”

Eren swallowed. “God, I hope so.”

Levi actually laughed a little, soft and much lighter and more easygoing than one would expect from his usual countenance. “You don't have to ask God for that. Come here, idiot. You're gonna freeze solid.”

“Under the circumstances, I really don't think that's possible.” But Eren was rushing in and snapping the curtain shut behind him.

Eren barely had enough time to duck his head beneath the hot, prickling spray, before Levi's mouth was latched onto his.

Distantly, Eren was a little in love with how Levi wrapped his arms around his neck, went to his toes, and firmly pressed the hard contours of his body against Eren's, strong chest to sharp hips. Eren
was again in awe of the raw passion a man like Levi hid behind the sulking expression and hooded eyes. And, bit by bit, Levi was allowing Eren to discover it.

Each time felt like a gift that Eren didn't deserve. He sure as hell didn't know what he'd done to attract the attention of someone like Levi, but he certainly wasn't going to try to get out of it.

Levi was honest – brutally so – and behind closed doors he didn't seem to be any different regarding his lust towards Eren. It felt empowering to be so openly desired – it was a high Eren couldn't resist or get enough of.

So, when Levi nipped at Eren's bottom lip, his fingertips burying bruises into Eren's hips, and said, “Kiss me,” Eren could do nothing but plunge forward.

Admittedly, actual washing was barely accomplished in that shower.

Later, Eren was diving under Levi's crisp, white duvet, butt naked and murmuring sweet nothings to the downy pillow he cuddled up to his face. He wanted to sleep forever.

“Oiy, shitsnack,” Levi snapped from the foot of the bed.

Eren pouted sleepily and looked over his shoulder. Levi stood there, black towel slung low around his slim hips, his eyes spelling out murder as he held Eren's abandoned towel in one hand.

“Leave another towel on my fucking floor and I'll be hanging you out to dry.”

Eren managed what he hoped was an innocent smile. “Yessir.”

Levi muttered something about a piece of shit under his breath and turned away to dump both towels in a clothes hamper.

Eren buried his face back into the pillow, feeling fresh and light despite the gloomy atmosphere descending upon the house. On the off chance he did get killed, at least he'd gotten laid – more than once – by someone he was pretty sure was a secret sex god.

The sound of the flights flicking off further sent Eren into deep relaxation. When the bed dipped beside him and Levi settled in, on his back and no doubt staring up at the ceiling, Eren turned his head and popped one eye open. It took a minute for his vision to adjust to the dark, but eventually he could make out the deep blue profile and open eyes. As Eren had guessed, Levi didn't look like he planned on sleeping any time soon.

Deciding to make the move so that Levi wouldn't have to, Eren shifted and scooted in, sloting his body against Levi's side and dropping his head on Levi's shoulder. A strong arm automatically came around Eren to keep him close and tight, and Eren's heart nearly burst from that single action.

“Your hair is gonna dry stupidly,” Levi murmured, his hand reaching up to ruffle through the damp mess.

“Eh. I'll just put it up.”

“Lazy.”

“Yep.”

In the silence, Eren could hear the gentle pitter patter of rain at the window. Levi's breaths were slow and even, his pulse steady near Eren's ear.
“So,” Eren said quietly, tracing one hand down the slight ridges of Levi's abs. “You were talking about me with Father Erwin earlier.”

Levi's answer was a grunt.

“Oh, come on,” Eren said. “I deserve to know.”

“It was just some bullshit about him noticing me favouring you.”

Eren huffed a soft laugh. “Uh, you do favour me.”

Levi didn't reply. He was obviously not happy with this realisation.

“What, you didn't notice? I mean, aside from the obvious fucking me?”

“I can't recall when I became so obviously tactless.”

Eren laughed a little harder this time, turning until he could half lay on Levi. He folded his arms on Levi's chest and peered down at him with a wide smile. “I like it. When you're around me you don't act like you've got a stick up your ass.”

Levi narrowed his eyes. “You wanna get hurt, kid?”

“Hey, I'm not the only one who noticed it, okay? Lay off.”

“You're getting far too cocky with me these days.”

Eren shrugged a little. After a moment of them openly studying each other in the darkness, Eren's brows drew together.

“So, the ravaging thing in the bathroom? Rebelling against the man after he warned you against me? Shitty priest.”

“Hence the ex.”

“I'm sure you didn't stop being a priest because you were horny.”

“Yeah, yeah. Like I said, I've got a lot of lost time to make up for.”

“Mmm...” Eren suddenly rolled, straddled Levi's hips and sat up with a grin. “Like now?”

“Like no,” Levi said shortly, although his hands fist ed on Eren's thighs, as if he were holding himself back. “Like go to bed now, because you're going to need your energy for tomorrow.”

Eren made a face at him in the dark, hoping it mostly went unseen.

“I saw that.”

With a sigh, Eren flopping back down, basically crushing Levi beneath him. Eren smushed his face against the crook of Levi's neck and inhaled his soft, clean scent.

“You've got a point.”

“Of course I do.” Levi's fingertips brushed the small of Eren's back, leaving sparks along Eren's skin.

“I'll be fine, you know,” Eren murmured against the warm shell of Levi's ear.
“Sure you will, brat.”

Eren fell asleep to the sound of Levi’s level heartbeat and a hand softly circling his back.
“Today's the day.”

Eren's eyes popped open. He knew it wasn't his own voice that he'd heard just then. Her deep, velvety cadence still echoed in his skull, ringing in his ears.

Rubbing the grit from his eyes, Eren wondered how conscious Lilith was of everything going on in Eren's life. He had a feeling she was cognisant of an alarming amount of shit.

Rolling to his side, Eren's mouth curved, his gaze softening as he watched Levi sleep like a dead man. Once again, he was face-down in the pillow, muscular arms spread out to either side. How the hell he could even breath like that, Eren did not know.

Only because Levi was basically unconscious, Eren leaned in and kissed the back of Levi's head, his lips lingering for a moment before he pulled away.

His entire body protested his standing up, but Eren did so all the same, taking one of his long, slow stretches as he eyed the grey morning light sifting through the blinds. The clock told him it was before six. Nobody was likely to be awake at this time.

Because Eren had neglected to bring any change of clothes downstairs, he rummaged through Levi's pristinely folded drawers and borrowed a pair of black boxer briefs. Jesus, they had to be expensive, because they fit like a glove and felt like fucking magic on his skin.

Wandering out into the hall, Eren quietly padded along the cool, dim corridor, ears perked up for any sounds. He'd gotten up the stairs and was turning to head to his room, when the bathroom door opened and Annie was standing there in her towel.

They both eyed each other, Annie's gaze like shrapnel as she investigated his 'morning after' look from head to toe.

“I'm not going to ask,” she said flatly.

“I keep saying you're the smartest one in the house.”

“Not arguing.”

“You're up early,” Eren said, frowning.

Annie crossed her arms beneath her towelled breasts and raised her eyebrows. “I get up early to work out. I don't like to mess up my routine. What's your excuse?”

“Um...” Eren could feel his entire chest and neck blush. “Oh, hey, can I ask you something? Kinda personal?”

“I assumed you already knew about the birds and the bees.”

“Seriously.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Annie waved him off, then pointedly eyed his barely clad crotch. “Now?”

“Uh, hold on.” Eren turned on his heel and made a beeline for his room. He shut the door behind him and went to a pile of clean laundry sitting on the wardrobe. He made a mental note to find out
who washed his clothes and to thank them. And also to go home and get more clothes, because he'd been wearing the same jeans and hoody for days now.

It was obvious that his dad did not know what to pack for him, nor what clothes Eren often wore – as evidenced by Eren squeezing himself into a slim pair of jeans which he had nearly grown out of. His holey ones needed a wash, and this was the only other pair packed with him. He sucked in a breath and zipped them up, then tossed on a navy and grey striped t-shirt. He was about to head back out when he passed the mirror and realised his bedhead was epic.

With a sigh, Eren roughly ran a brush through it, and put it up in a half pony tail. Satisfied, he headed out, barefoot, and made his way to Annie's door.

He couldn't hear anything when he pressed his ear against the wood, and he knocked very quietly, hoping not to wake anyone else on the floor. He remembered then that Mikasa and Jean had gone to Reiner's club for the night. Mikasa had probably only stumbled in a little while ago.

Annie answered moments later. Her damp hair was twisted into a messy bun at the base of her neck, and she was dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt with her high school logo on it. She opened her door wide and waved him in, shutting it behind him with her foot.

“What's up?”

“Can I sit?”

Annie looked at him like he was missing a screw. “Yeah, obviously. I don't care.”

“Right.” Eren perched himself at the foot of the bed. He looked at Annie, who pulled out a stool from underneath her cluttered vanity table and sat down. “So, something serious is going down today.”

Annie's face was set in sober lines, her eyes grave. “Okay?”

“I'm going... They're gonna exorcise me.”

Every angle of Annie's body visibly stiffened, her jaw going hard and her nails digging into knees. The colour drained from her face and she looked about to either run or attack.

Eren held up his hands, rushing and fumbling through his words. “You're fine – you're safe, Annie, you're safe! I wouldn't go near you if I thought I'd hurt you. This is – this is a lot more serious than just an average possession. She's been in me – she's been in me since I was a kid. I just haven't known it. And now that I do...”

“Eren.” Annie's voice was clenched, like a coiled spring. “Don't take this personally, but I don't want to be near you like this.”

“Wait, I just need to know -”

Annie stood, then, her expression sad, but distant. “You know I'm a magnet for this stuff, Eren. You saved me, and I'll always be thankful to you for that. You made me feel normal. I don't feel so weak or tired all the time. But I also care about my well being, now, and I don't want you endangering that. So please. Go.”

“I just need to know -” Eren stood to come towards Annie, but she evaded and opened the door for him, practically hiding behind the panelling. “I just need to know what it feels like,” Eren said desperately as he backed out of the room and stood in the hall.
“I’m shitting myself here, Annie, okay? I don’t remember a thing about my first exorcism, but I know this one isn’t going to be like the last. So tell me – any advice?”

Despite her tiny stature, Annie took up the entire doorway. She eyed him with her shoulders and feet squared, her arms across her chest.

“It feels like being at the bottom of the deepest, darkest well there ever was. And you only have your fear to keep you company. Sorry, Eren. My only advice is follow the light. Claw your way up until your nails have ripped off and your knuckles are broken and your body is screaming from falling back into the pit over and over. Just... fight.”

With that, Annie quietly closed the door in his face.

Eren raked his palms over his face with a long sigh.

*Fight, huh?*

***

The entire house was a little off kilter.

Annie didn’t come for breakfast – probably avoiding Eren. Mikasa hadn’t dragged herself from bed. Eren had lied to Levi about eating something while Levi had been sleeping. Father Erwin had appeared, looking pristine in all black and his stark white collar, grabbed a bagel and a cup of coffee the size of his head, and announced he was going to go make preparations. And Levi ate one piece of toast while downing five cups of scalding Earl Grey.

No one was one-hundred percent today.

Eren didn’t know what to do with himself. He ended up just sitting on the couch with the television on, but watching and retaining nothing. At one point, he got up to answer the door to Petra, who had apparently been notified by Levi that something was going down today and her services should be available. Eren tried to be polite, but he knew he sounded mostly distant and detached, and Petra quickly excused herself to go check on Bertolt's progress.

“Eren?”

Eren blinked from his static state and noticed Mikasa standing in the entryway. She wore plaid boxer shorts and an oversized hoody, with hair pulled up in a ratty bun and her bangs pinned away from her face. She looked hopelessly young, for once, and even a little delicate. Eren noticed she had knobby, scarred knees.

“How were things with your dad?”

“Dramatic,” Eren said with a hollow laugh. “I’d say there were no surprises, but that’s not necessarily
true. I'm gonna... er, today, Father Erwin is going to try something to help me get better.”

“Yes? What's that?”

“Eh, something a little out of the box. Don't worry about it for now. By the end of the day you'll know if it worked or not.”

Mikasa sat up sharply, her eyes narrowed as she inspected Eren's drawn countenance. “What the hell does out of the box mean?”

“Just – don't worry about it, okay? I'll be fine.”

“I don't believe you,” Mikasa said immediately, drilling him with a look. Eren couldn't even blame her, since her distrust was spot on.

“Look,” Eren said, reaching out and squeezing her elbow reassuringly. “Just have some faith in me. And Father Erwin, Levi, Hanji... my dad, too. Please. I'm really gonna be fine.”

Mikasa's gaze melted, her head cocking as she studied him with concern. “You're important to me, Eren. We're all family now – do you get that? I just don't want you hurt.”

“Yeah,” Eren said with a meagre smile as he met her eyes and nodded. “I get that.”

***

“Is this really necessary?” Eren asked, feeling pretty damn awkward as Levi finished tightening the knots that bound him to a chair. His ankles were strung to each chair leg, as well. Eren felt like a hog-tied pig.

Everyone had gathered in the basement, including Hanji and Dad. This sounded more ominous than it actually was, considering the basement was completely renovated and served as Father Erwin's living quarters. The carpeting was plush, the furnishings were solid, polished wood, and the decoration impeccable. This was the first time Eren had ever been down here – and, to be honest, he'd never been particularly curious about it. There'd always been bigger things on Eren's mind. But now that he was here – tied up or not – he had to admit that Father Erwin had surprisingly nice digs.

“I'm afraid it is,” Dad said, his gaze fixed on some old, dusty book, where he flicked through the pages he'd bookmarked, checking if all was in order. “Lilith is strong. With your gifts, she may be stronger. We can't risk you injuring yourself or one of us. It's not an uncommon occurrence during an average exorcism.”

Eren didn't reply, because that was fair enough. Didn't mean he had to like it.

He briefly made eye contact with Levi, who was standing at attention like a Doberman ready to snarl at anyone who held out a hand to him. Waves of hostility and tension emanated from every pour, his gaze shadowed and dark as he closely monitored everyone in the room.

If Eren told anyone that this was the same man who liked to pet his hair in bed, no one would ever believe him. Eren preferred to keep it that way.

Hanji was lounging on plush, suede couch in forest green. She had her notepad out, a high-end SLR digital camera resting on a cushion, and was chewing on a Slim Jim. She looked as if she were sitting down to watch a show. Eren supposed that's what this was, on some level – a spectacle. And Eren was the main attraction.
Looking around, Eren felt like this should all be a little more dramatic or something. The room was well lit, there weren't any candles and creepy shadows in the corners of the room. Aside from him being tied to a chair – and the eerie faded handprints that still bruised Father Erwin's neck – everything was so unnervingly average.

Eren supposed his only experiences with exorcisms were full of fright. First is mother. Then walking in on Annie with a face that wasn't her own. And Bertolt bedroom with waves of muggy heat rising from the floor and clinging to the walls. Eren discounted his own exorcism because he still remembered very little of it – the distant pain of being splashed with holy water, and not a lot else.

Then there was Annie. She'd been possessed more times than Eren cared to guess. She'd been living in this house for at least a year and had experienced her share of personal horrors. Eren thought of her warnings of what it felt like to go under. He also considered her deceptively advice. **Fight.**

“So,” Eren said, mounting his courage as he watched Father Erwin open the Bible to a page bookmarked in gold ribbon. “Let’s get going.”

Father Erwin looked up and met Eren's eyes, nodded soberly and glanced at Dad. Although Eren had only seen the two of them interact starting yesterday, they obviously had years of joint experiences which leant to their harmonious rapport. What history stretched between them? What other cover ups existed aside from the failed exorcism of a young mother to a powerful demon?

Little time remained for Eren to think over that shit, because Father Erwin was murmuring something in Latin and everyone in the room automatically made the sign of the cross over their bodies.

Until now, Eren had never seen Levi actually join in anything particularly religious. Eren had to remind himself that Levi had performed countless exorcisms during his time as a priest – and that much was evident in the way Levi seemed to sink into a bland, mechanical state the moment Father Erwin began to recite from the Bible.

A trickle of fear slithered icily down Eren's back. He didn't feel changed, yet, but the deep, nearly melodic verses rolling from Father Erwin's lips seemed to descend upon the room like a thick fog or heavy, dark cloud. Eren sucked in a breath and found it difficult to inhale, like the air was too heavy and damp to do anything but pool in his lungs.

Did anyone else *feel* that?

“**Eren.**”

Eren's eyes shot open. He didn't know when he'd closed them. He wildly searched the room for the source of the voice, like velvet, like midnight seduction.

“**Eren, darling.**”

Did anyone else *hear* that?

No one looked any different. Darker – was it darker in here, or was that just his vision clouding? Eren's fingers tightened on the arms of the chair, nails scraping and digging into the wood as he frantically scanned between the living people in the room, searching for the dead or never-alive.

“I've been waiting for this,” she said, voice taut with excitement.

“You have?”

Eren felt like he was going blind. Smudges smeared across his eyesight, blurring figures and shapes
into dark, twisting auras with no faces, no features.

“Who's he speaking to?”

Levi's voice, but he sounded distant, like Eren's head had been shoved under murky bathwater. The air was distressingly wet, choking down Eren's throat as he gulped quick, shallow breaths.

“Why, of course! All I've ever wanted is for you to truly let me in. My perfect child.”

“Wait,” Eren gasped, blinking rapidly ahead of him. The room was closing in, like he'd reached the end of a tunnel and all that was left was the black void. Panic wrapped long, skeletal fingers around is neck and squeezed. Shit, shit, he had to tell them this was all wrong!

“Wait! She wants -”

Falling. Eren was falling back, back into the dark. His skin closed in on him, tightening around him like a straight jacket from which there was no escape. Eren's mouth ripped open to scream, but the iron taste of blood flooded his throat, filled his nostrils, gushed into his lungs.

No, Eren wasn't falling. He was drowning.

Realising he was no longer tied up, Eren flailed his limbs, his shoulders screaming with pain as he struggled to float. He couldn't see, didn't know which way was up, even though he could feel himself sinking. The packed hammer of his heart was the only sound.

What had Annie said about clawing towards the light? There was no light. Eren's eyes were wide open, and there was nothing.

This is how you die, Eren thought, feeling his lungs burn and his heart stutter and slow. He was drowning, without a doubt choking on blood or water or bile – whatever it was he was floating in. This is how you die.

Having accomplished nothing with his life. Never telling someone special that he loved them. Never having a profession which gave him a sense of worth. Never travelling to a beach on the sea. Never owning a dog. A hundred other things.

He should have known. As Eren drifted and the pain increased within him, like he might burst at the seams, he still berated himself for not thinking of the possibility. Lilith hadn't been strong enough against Eren to initially surface on her own. She'd needed help – and they were giving it to her.

What Eren still didn't know – perhaps would never know – was what Lilith would do once she was free. Once she could use Eren's body as her own vessel, then what? Was Eren doomed to drift in this abyss and feel himself choke and drown and die over and over for the rest of time? Was Lilith going to hurt the people he cared about?

Levi.

Eren's fingers twitched, then fistet. He tried once more to inhale, but only got a mouthful of blood and the searing pain of a lung popping in his chest. His entire torso was on fire, and yet he felt almost entirely unable to move. He was floating down, down, further away from Levi. Further away from a future that Eren could have been proud of.

Annie had lied. There was no light.

What was happening out there, now? How long had Eren been aimlessly adrift in this ocean of
physical and mental misery? Seconds, minutes, or hours? *Days*? There was no way to tell.

No light. Hopeless.

“You're a lighthouse. You're foundation and brick and light. And if you could touch us, feel us, just imagine what you could do with that gift.”

Armin's words from a lifetime ago.

Eren's eyes widened in the dark. *You're a lighthouse.*

He was a lighthouse. He had light. He'd had light all along. He just had to *use* it.

Though it made no difference, Eren shut his eyes and looked inward. He remembered the electric buzz of Armin's body, his hands. The way he filled Eren with an ethereal energy, something which had shocked to life a new part of him. Who had called it his third eye? Eren couldn't remember. It didn't matter.

Eren's gut twisted in pain, felt heavy and laden with the black, sickly sea in which he floated. Even as he could feel himself filling to the brim with darkness, that was merely physical—wasn't it? His mind was still his own. His thoughts and abilities were still Eren.

Once more, Eren envisioned the light. How it made him feel as if he could glow from the inside out. Shine through his pores and push the darkness to the edges, where it lurked. He was the light. He had the power. Lilith couldn't stand unless he allowed her to—and that was something he hadn't realised until it was too late, until he was stuck here. Lilith had needed him to let go, if only for a moment, in order to bypass that third eye, that watchful guardian.

So, if he could let Lilith out, he could damn well shove the bitch back in.

Eren's eyes shot open and lit up like the fucking sun.

***

“*Now you've made me angry, my darling.*”

Sunshine warmly pooled across Eren's face as his lashes fluttered and he opened his eyes to a slightly blurry room. He blinked once, twice, and three times before his room sharpened to clarity. Birds twittered and sang outside Eren's window, at the head of the bed. The sheets smelled like fresh grass and Eren felt—well, he felt like he'd been in a bar fight, actually.

With a groan, Eren sat up slowly, his muscles crying with every movement. He looked down and noted he was in flannel pyjamas and nothing else. Who had changed him? When had he been changed? This was becoming an all too common occurrence.

Like a hammer to the face, Eren physically flinched as he was struck with his final memory before it all became a mess. Lilith. For that time, he'd known when it would feel like if he lost to her forever, and it had been horrific. Eren knew what it felt like to die painfully.

He also knew that he was stronger than he ever thought he could be. That gave him a short moment's solace.

Until Eren noticed that the knuckles on both of his hands were bruised, bloody, and on the verge of scabbing. Gawking, Eren turned his hands, palms up, and stared at them, then turned them back around as if the injuries would no longer be there. They remained.
What the hell had happened?

Eren stepped out of bed and hissed as the small of his back smarted.

“What the?”

Looking over his shoulder, Eren turned in a circle in a ridiculous attempt to see his own back. When that obviously didn't pan out, he left his room and headed for the bathroom. With the door still open, he turned and inspected his back in the mirror. His eyes bugged out.

A myriad of black and purple bruising ate at the tan skin of his lower back and up his ribcage, reaching towards his left shoulder blade.

“Shit. What the fuck?”

“Eren!” Petra was in the hall, and she had a hand over her heart like he'd scared the daylights out of her. She quickly recovered, and went from relieved to strangely guarded. “You are... Eren?”

Eren blinked and scrunched his face in intense confusion. “I mean. We've met? On several occasions. If that's what you mean.”

Wow, this was embarrassing. How had she managed to forget who he was in a household this small?

Petra eyed him for a second before her small shoulders relaxed and she sighed through her nose with apparent relief. “Okay. Yes, alright. It's not that I didn't remember you, it's just that...”

Eren came out of the bathroom with a deep frown. “Just that what?”

“That -”

“That Lilith was walking around with you as her meatsuit,” came Levi's voice from the top of the stairs.

Eren's heart flopped around, unsure whether it wanted to leap at the sound of Levi or drop dead with the news he carried.

“What?” Eren froze in place.

Petra coughed and gave them both a small smile. She excused herself and swept past Levi and made her way downstairs. Levi remained in place, one hand on the bannister, the other loose at his side. He was dressed immaculately as ever – but for the very obvious discoloured swelling beneath one eye.

Eren's mouth opened, looked for words and found none.

“Yes,” Levi said, “You did that. And no, don't beat yourself up over it. I already did.”

“Did what?”

“Beat you up over it.”

Eren's hand instinctively went to his face, where he realised his cheekbone was fucking sore. “Are you saying -”

“That we lost you?” Levi's voice was quiet and taut. “Yes. For a time.”

“The hallway probably isn't the best place,” Levi said dryly, as he eyed Eren’s half-naked body from head to toe. No, he was more scouring, searching for something. What?

“I'm – I'm fine,” Eren said, rubbing his upper arms with his hands. He'd been warm in bed, but the corridor was getting chillier by the minute.

Levi's gaze shot up to meet Eren's, as if he hadn't even realised he'd been surveying Eren's body so closely.

“Yeah,” he said hollowly.

“Levi -” Eren started towards him. God, all Eren wanted to do was hold Levi, kiss him, remind himself that they were both alive.

To Eren's abject shock, Levi took a step back, down one stair and further away from Eren.

“Clean yourself up,” Levi said, now not meeting Eren's eyes. “Come down when you're ready. We'll talk.”

“Levi, I'm okay,” Eren said, his throat tightening and his eyebrows knitted in confusion. “It's me. Just me.”

But Levi was already turning and heading downstairs.

“I know,” was all he said, before he disappeared.

In the silence of the corridor, Eren fisted his hands at his sides and ground out, “What the fuck did you do?”

He swore he heard the distant sound of laughter echoing within his chest.

“Bitch, you are so going down.”

***

Eren sat at the dinner table with Hanji's camera in hand. She'd taken several ten minute clip videos of the exorcism. But Eren didn't get to watch the initial few, because it was the final one to which Levi had directed him, and then promptly left the room, announcing he was making tea.

Father Erwin was the only other person at the table with him. He sat across from Eren, looking a little worse for wear himself, despite his pristine general appearance.

Pressing the play button, Eren frowned as he watched himself, still tied to the chair, begin to convulse in his seat. His eyes rolled up in his head, the whites unnerving Eren, even when he wasn't actually in that room right now. Father Erwin's voice was booming over Eren's howls, rapid-fire bullets of Latin that had to have practically shook the walls at the time.

In the background, almost out of shot, Eren noticed Levi's wide eyes transfixed on Eren, his face bone pale.

Then, as suddenly as the seizures started, they stopped and Eren was flung forward, his entire body jerking once and his chin dropping to his chest. Everyone was silent for the longest time.

In the film, Father Erwin called Lilith's name. Nothing. He approached Eren's lax figure and pressed
a small, silver crucifix to his forehead – still, nothing. Father Erwin called Eren's name and waited.

Seconds later, Eren was stirring, lifting his head like it was the most difficult thing he'd ever done. When he looked up, his eyes were clear, if not shining with unshed tears.

“Is it over?” he said in a cracked, hoarse voice that undoubtedly belonged to Eren.

The whole room seemed to release a collective breath. In the corner, Levi blew out a breath and scrubbed his hands down his face, one hand dropping and the other palm pausing to cover his mouth for a long moment as he stared at Eren from across the room.

“Yes, Eren,” Father Erwin said soothingly. “It's over.”

The video cut out.

Carefully, gently, minding his temper, Eren set down the camera on the table instead of chucking it across the room. He swallowed hard and met Father Erwin's strong, silent gaze.

“That wasn't me.”

“That wasn't you,” Father Erwin said, nodding faintly. “I'm afraid I wasn't there for the following altercation between you and Levi, though. I only know what he told me. You may get more out of him.”

There was some kind of implication behind Father Erwin's tone, which Eren didn't care to decode right now. More important matters had presented themselves.

“And what about before?”

“Before?”

“I'm assuming the other videos are of you and Dad questioning Lilith.”

“That's correct.”

“So what did she say? Wait – I can guess one bit. She needed this exorcism to help release her. I'm too strong for her to control from the starting line. She needed the push. The head start to get going.”

Father Erwin looked a little surprised. “Yes. How did you -”

“I figured it out right as I was going under. When I was yelling wait – which you didn't, by the way.”

“Demons will say anything to get out of an exorcism, Eren. I had no way of knowing.”

Eren scowled. He felt like Father Erwin could have damn well noticed the difference. Then again, Lilith had managed to trick everyone – even, apparently, Levi for a while. She'd practically had a lifetime to learn Eren's mannerisms, after all.

“Whatever. Can you tell me what happened? I don't want to watch those videos, if it's all the same to you. I had enough horror during the actual exorcism itself.”

“You remember it?”

Eren shook his head. “Not in the way you think. I couldn't hear what you guys said – or Lilith. I was... I was in limbo. Hell. Wherever.”
“I see.”

Eren wanted to say that Father Erwin didn't. He didn't see. No one could know unless they'd been there. But he kept it to himself. He knew he was being confrontational because of his sour reunion with Levi. He shouldn't take it out on anyone else.

“So, what can you tell me?”

Father Erwin took a breath. “I can tell you that she was eager to speak. In retrospect, this was probably because she assumed she’d won and had no need to hide the truth. She spoke of the first exorcism. That she had imprinted in the key which Grisha had brought home, and that it had been an easy jump into... into -”

“My mother. Yeah, I got it. Because she had gifts like mine, she was like an ideal host or whatever.”

“Something akin to that, yes. But even your mother wasn't strong enough, and her body began to deteriorate, leading to the exorcism. Lilith had watched over you, and noted your growing strength. She found you to be the ideal vessel.”

“Because she could live in me without killing me,” Eren said quietly, refusing to look away from Father Erwin. He couldn't avert his gaze or run away. Not anymore.

“But there was a problem.”

Eren cocked his head, hoping Father Erwin would continue forth.

“She seemed... both amused and perplexed when she spoke of this. But she found that she was unable to use your gifts against you. Due to the trauma of the exorcism you performed on your mother, and our consequent hypnotherapy, your gifts were locked away, along with your memory of the incident. There was nothing about you that could connect with Lilith. She couldn't use your link with the spirit world to slip in, because that door had been closed.”

“So, what, you're telling me she didn't actually possess me? That doesn't make sense. She's with me right now.”

“That's not exactly what I mean,” Father Erwin said, his voice grave. “Essentially, she haunted you. And while she haunted you, she attempted to attract a host of vengeful and angry spirits and demons toward you.”

“What?” Eren scowled. “What the *fuck*?”

“You see, her intention was to wear you down. By attracting an army towards you, battering at your defences for ten years, she gambled that one would finally find its way into a crack.”

“And break me open from the inside out,” Eren whispered, his arms erupting in goosebumps. The realisation that this had all been occurring during his childhood and high school years was terrifying. An entire world of horrors closing in on him and he'd never been the wiser.

Father Erwin nodded, his gaze openly sorrowful for a moment, as if he really did feel for Eren. “It worked. That was the first exorcism. I performed it myself, and it had been a straightforward affair. Extremely easy. I should have seen past that. I should have sensed that it was no coincidence that two people from the same family would encounter the same difficulties with the supernatural.”

“There was no way you could know,” Eren said quietly, and meant it. No one could have simply guessed the extent that a demon would go through to attain life. The perfect vessel. Eren shuddered.
He felt a little faint, and couldn't remember when he last ate.

“This all happened last night, right?”

“The exorcism was in the morning, as you know, and that went to around noon. Lilith was walking around as you for several hours. You had lunch with us – albeit quietly – and retired to Levi's room where you two would go through the videos together, so that you could learn of what I'd just told you.”

Father Erwin's broad jaw went stiff, the cords in his neck tightening as he stared hard over Eren's head. “I don't understand it. How she tricked us. Both Hanji and your father looked you over when the exorcism was cut-off. Could a demon really be so powerful that they don't respond to the Lord's tools?”

Eren shrugged. He didn't know the answers to shit like that. “Maybe my body made it possible. She obviously thinks I'm special or whatever.”

Father Erwin blinked at him. “You are special, Eren. It's a shame you're not a Catholic. With the miracles that surround you and no doubt will continue to do so in the future, you could be a saint.”

Eren surprised them both by wholeheartedly laughing his way into exhaustion. He gasped for breath, wiping tears from his eyes with the backs of his hands.

“Yeah. Yeah, right, okay. Thanks, Father.”

“Please,” Father Erwin said with a slight curve of lips, “After all of this, call me Erwin.”

“Sure,” Eren said with a half a grin. He was already moving to stand from his chair. “I guess I better go find Levi, then. Final piece of the puzzle and that stuff.”

Erwin murmured a sound of agreement, but a deep frown had crept up on him. He looked to Eren, his eyes solemn. “I know you don't need it and perhaps don't want it, but I'm going to impart some advice on you.”

“Uh, okay?”

“Concerning Levi... He rarely makes mistakes. It's both a source of pride for him and a gaping hole in his armour. By that I mean, when he does fail, he takes it very seriously. Too seriously.”

Eren pouted in thought. “What has he failed at?”

Erwin raised his eyebrows and leaned back in his chair. “You'll have to ask him.”

“I – sure.” Confused, Eren scratched his jaw and set off from the room. Before he entered the kitchen, he paused and looked over his shoulder at Erwin. “Hey, this isn't over, you know. I'm not giving up. Ever.”

Erwin's eyes widened a little, an he nodded.

“Eren, I don't have the slightest doubt.”
“Wanna talk?” Eren said, after opening the door to Levi's bedroom without knocking. A week ago, he wouldn't have dreamed of such a daring move. Now he knew that Levi was a lot more bark than bite. Okay, the bite was there, too, but it took a little more provocation than one would imagine.

A steaming cup of tea sat at the bedside table. Levi didn't look up from the basket of laundry on his bed, where he was crisply folding dark clothes and setting them neatly aside. Levi's lips were thin and pale, but he looked otherwise untroubled.

Eren knew better.

“Okay, let's try this again.” Eren approached the foot of the bed, closing the distance between them. Regardless of their physical proximity, Eren got the impression that a canyon had cracked open between them while he'd been incapacitated. “Talk – now. You owe me that much.”

Silence remained a dark curtain around Levi, and after a while Eren thought he was going remain wholly ignored. Just as Eren's lips parted in some new threat, Levi said, “There's very little to say, apart from what I already told you. Lilith remained in your body, no one noticed, and when we were alone, I sensed there was something off. Lilith saw my recognition and came at me. I assume she was attempting to kill me. At the same time, you – she – fainted. Now you're here. What more do you want, kid?”

“Keep calling me kid and see where that gets you,” Eren bit off, altogether fucking finished with being held at arms length with that one simple nickname. “What the hell's going on, Levi? This is way unlike you and if I can see it, I know you must know it, too.”

“Are you fucking blind?” Levi's shout was so sudden and unexpected as he shot from the bed that Eren found himself taking an intimidated step in retreat. Levi was in his face in seconds, his black eyebrows screwed up, a sneer twisting his mouth. Despite their notable height difference, his wrath carried him like a man six feet tall.

“Did you not hear me when I said no one noticed? No one! Not even me. I didn't have the slightest fucking inkling that you weren't even with me. If anyone should have known, it should have been me, Eren. Aren't you the slightest bit disappointed that your own... that I couldn't tell the difference between you and a blood thirsty demon?”

“I'm just happy I'm alive, for fuck's sake!” Eren had the slipperiest handle on what they were arguing about. How could Levi blame himself? For years, Lilith had been given nothing but time to watch and learn about Eren and his mannerisms. If she'd wanted to trick people, of course she was going to accomplish her goal. “Am I not allowed to just take it at face value, Levi? At the end of the day, you did notice and now I'm here, so where's the harm?”

“I kissed her,” Levi said sharply, fury colouring his cheeks red. “We kissed. More than once. I kissed the one thing that I loathe more than anything in this world, and I didn't even know it wasn't you,
Eren.

Eren went still, processing. He felt all expression drop from his lax features.

“How...” Eren cleared his throat. “Then how did you know?”

Levi folded his arms across his chest, his quiet inhale a little shaky. He looked away, then paced towards the window to look out. Eren had never seen Levi so perturbed, so uncomfortable in his skin. This was the man who remained motionless before the onslaught of evil, of danger. He was always stable, always self assured on some level.

This frayed Levi was new. And it was their relationship, and whatever attachment Levi had for Eren, that was inflicting this visible discomfort. All over a kiss. Well, Eren could tell there was more to Levi's guilt and anger than some lip-locking. Levi was a man of principles and intelligence. The fact that he didn't notice that Lilith was using Eren as a meatsuit was probably the real dagger in his side.

By now, Eren was convinced that Levi wasn't going to reply. So when Levi muttered something under his breath, in the direction of the window, Eren was caught off guard.

“What was that?”

“I said, she called me darling.”

“Oh.” Eren scrunched his face up. “Gross.”

“Yeah. If you ever called me that I'd have to throw you through a wall.”

“Noted, but the warning's unnecessary,” Eren said, his lips quirking briefly. Levi must have sensed the levity in Eren's voice, because his attention finally dragged from the window to rest warily on Eren.

“Y'know,” Eren said conversationally, tucking his hands in his pockets with a little shrug. “You haven't properly welcomed me back yet. That's pretty low, considering all I've been through.”

Something sparked in Levi's expression, a flare of heat. “Manipulative little shit.”

“If that's what it takes.” Eren cocked his head and watched the subtle shift of expression across Levi's sharp features. He looked a little sad, a little angry, and a lot unsure. He needed someone to snap him out of it.

“How can you hold a grudge against your father after all this time, but you don't even want to take a swing at me?” Levi said tonelessly, remaining still at across the room.

Eren blinked, caught off guard by the question. Had Levi truly convinced himself that Eren wouldn't forgive him for this?

“Levi,” Eren said gravely, his grin melting to frown. “I know that I'm technically still under your care in this house, but holy shit, it's not like I've ever expected you to get to know me inside out. I -”

“I should have,” Levi said crisply. Springing into motion, he marched over with purpose and took Eren's chin in between cold, rough fingers. His eyes reminded Eren of smoky, dry ice, burning to the touch. Levi's jaw clenched and worked stiffly as they stared each other down for a second – Eren curious, Levi fuming.

“I should have known you better. I looked at Lilith and saw only you. I saw your stupidly beautiful,
haunting eyes and nothing of the creature behind them. I kissed Lilith, I pressed her body against this very door and I only tasted you, felt you. I’d basically been looking at, touching, loving, your corpse, Eren, because you were already gone. And I didn't suspect a thing.”

Shock was a lightning bolt jolting through Eren's chest, shockwaves rippling from his thundering heart through his hot, buzzing limbs. He gawked down, his jaw loose in Levi's hold. Did... had Levi realised what he'd just said? His eyes were shining with intent, his breath coming in short stutters, his fingers warming against Eren's skin.

“Levi, did you just...”

“I think we need to stop this,” Levi said in a monotone as he dropped his hand, his intense stare unblinking. “This relationship has gone so far past professional that I've obviously lost my hold on my ability to properly do my job.”

Eren's blooming heart wilted on the spot, crumbled at Levi's feet.

“W-what?” Eren said weakly.

“Erwin was right. I've lost my perspective with you. I've become more of a hindrance than a help, at this point. We are unnecessary distractions for each other.”

As if Levi had physically slapped him, Eren sucked in a sharp, shuddering breath.

“You just...” Disbelief evaporated in flame. Eren's hands fist at his sides as he loomed over Levi. “You just told me you love me, you fucking idiot! What the hell do you think you're doing?”

Levi went pale, his eyes taking in Eren's fury with – confusion? Had he really not realised he'd said it? Then realisation dawned in Levi's expression with a trace of horror.

Eren stepped in and gripped Levi's hips firmly. With one harsh tug, the contours of their bodies found each other in harmony, even if their gazes clashed in discord. Eren dipped his chin, nearly aligning their noses and eyes.

Levi shut his eyes, his lips firm as he inhaled a slow, composed breath. He neither leaned into or away from Eren's hold.

“This is what's best for us both in the long run, Eren.”

“Do you seriously believe that or are you just scared that you fucked up? Because the Levi I know doesn't run away from anything.”

At that, Levi's inky lashes lifted, his guarded look catching Eren's heated gaze. Something lingered in the grey shadows of his eyes. Regret? A distant memory?

“That's merely proof that you don't know me nearly as well as you believe.”

“Well, if that's the fucking case, then what the hell are you doing repeating past mistakes?” Eren demanded, pressing his wrinkled brow to Levi's smooth one. He would continue to invade Levi's personal space and push him hard until Levi relented to this bullshit line of thought. “I know this is early in the game and I don't have much experience with actual relationships -”

“Neither do I -”

“But don't you think that we've got something we shouldn't give up on yet?”
Levi's eyes flashed molten silver, shining with a shocking sheen of wetness as he bared his teeth with every bit off word.

"You were gone, Eren! You were as good as dead and I didn't have a fucking clue."

Levi shoved off Eren's chest and spun away in retreat. His hands slapped down on the solid wood of a set of drawers, his shoulders a tense landscape, his head slumped. In the mirror on the wall above the bureau, Eren could only see the pitch curtain of Levi's hair shrouding his face.

"If this happens again -" Levi's voice cracked and he swallowed. "And it very well may... What's to stop her from tricking me – us – and losing you for good? Do you have no sense of self-preservation? Wouldn't you rather I had clear head than one which insists on obsessing over your ridiculous hair rather than facing the issues at hand?"

"Levi."

Eren lunged forward and gripped Levi's arm, yanking him around until Levi's back thumped dully against the lip of the dresser.

"Levi, I'm here. I'm back. I'm here not just for me, but for us. Don't you get it? We've both learned to function so well on our own – but aren't we better together? I mean, don't I kinda give you strength in the same way you for for me?"

Eren licked his chapped lips, his eyes flicking to the floor, then back up to Levi's silently stunned expression.

"Even a little?"

There had always been boundaries between them. Eren knew that some of its foundations were built on their age difference. It went without saying. Levi had experienced more in his lifetime and was wiser, sharper, and more honed for it. He had a past of which Eren would never be a part – a past that seemed to be both the steel in Levi's backbone and the sword in his hand. A weapon he wielded in order to keep the world at bay.

Eren didn't begrudge any of that. One, because he'd never put too much thought into it. Two, because everyone had a past which they held tightly to their chests and clad in armour. Maybe it was because Eren had his own share of traumas that he didn't feel the need to share, but he understood that aspect of Levi – the full body armour which accompanied the sword.

But right now, they shouldn't be in battle against one another. How could they hold the other close with weapons at the ready and breastplates of tarnished metal? Eren had discarded everything at Levi's feet – was facing him, more bare than any physical nudity.

But that would accomplish nothing unless Levi dropped the sword.

Levi blinked, his lips slightly parted, his eyes a little foggy. Vulnerability made him appear younger, the ordinarily hard lines of his eyebrows gentler, raised up as he took in Eren's hopeful expression.

A painfully striking flash of teeth and a smirk shocked across Levi's face, his eyes going clear and bright, one eyebrow arching as he leaned back against the bureau with a casual air.

"When did you learn to give speeches like that?" Levi asked dryly, only the faintest waver in his voice to give him away.

Eren loosened his grip on Levi's arm, the cuff of his fingers slowly caressing down the fine cotton
shirt until they reached Levi's wrist. Eren's thumb lingered at Levi's pulse point, found it humming faster than Levi's demeanour illustrated.

“I have my moments,” Eren said, his chest feeling tight and frozen, on the precipice of shattering. “So, what do you say?"

Levi glanced away, over Eren's shoulder.

“Listen, Eren —"

“I'm here,” Eren said lowly, his tone as firm as stone. He gripped the edge of the bureau, hands on either side of Levi's elbows, caging him in. “I'm not her, Levi. And I believe, wholeheartedly, that you'll never make the same mistake as you did before. Never.”

Levi's exhale was silent and cool, but Eren was close enough to see the jackhammer pulse thumping against the pale column of his throat. Eren was not going to let this go. If nothing else, he was unwaveringly tenacious about the things in which he believed and held dear.

And, above all, Levi was Eren's dearest.

“Eren —” Levi sounded exhausted.

"Levi.” Eren dipped his head, his nose brushing Levi's warm cheek. Eren's lips skimmed the subtle, pink bow of Levi's top lip. Levi held his breath and Eren continued to speak, his mouth a breath from Levi's. “I'm here. I'm back. You didn't lose me. I came back for you, Levi, and now all I'm asking is you come back to me, too.”

Levi launched himself against Eren without warning, arms linking tightly around Eren's shoulders, fingers diving into his hair. A hot, insistent mouth locked on Eren's like they hadn't seen each other in years. Eren moaned into the messy kiss, returning every lashing of tongue with his own. Slamming Levi's back against the drawers with mindless fervour, Eren's hands dragged down and around to roughly palm Levi's ass. Levi was like a live wire, all sparking scrapes of teeth and electric rolls of hips, snapping delicious shocks through Eren's limbs.

“It's you,” was all Levi rasped against Eren's hungry mouth. Levi's lips smeared along Eren's jaw, nipped sharply at his chin, then at his throat like an animal marking his mate. “It's you.”

Biting back a whimper, Eren tightly gripped Levi's ass and hefted him right off his feet. Levi's nails sunk into the nape of Eren's neck, cutting burning crescents that sizzled the skin as he was slid onto the bureau, sending books and trinkets scattering to the floor like casualties of war.

Levi's legs were iron around Eren's waist. They ripped at each other's shirts, popping buttons and stretching hems to near ripping point in their haste to reach skin on skin. Their lips barely separated, so intent were they both on destroying each other, crashing through barriers and leaving marks and bites that led to bruised collarbones and swollen lips.

“All remaining blood in Eren's body promptly drained and shot straight to his dick. He swayed against Levi in a daze, swallowing hard and loud as Levi murmured in his ear, “I need to feel you. Need you to be real.”

Eren's shallow breaths quivered against Levi's damp temple, before he pressed an almost chaste kiss to Levi's blushing ear. Levi's hands fisted at Eren's back, and his gasp would have gone unnoticed had they not been clinging to each other so tightly.
“Don't move,” Eren said breathlessly.

Christ, he didn't want to move either, but if Levi was going to let him top, Eren was going to make sure he fucked the guy senseless.

Levi lounged back against his palms, fully settling his weight on the top of the bureau. His shoulders thumped against the tall, wide mirror perched on the wall behind him. His mouth was red raw, colour travelling high along his sharp cheekbones, his eyes hooded and expectant. He watched Eren steadily, and the latter knew that Levi had no plans on going anywhere any time soon.

After aiming one final heated look Levi's way, Eren made a dash for Levi's bedside table – the trip only made slightly awkward by the raging boner rubbing against the unforgiving zip of his jeans. Eren blindly grappled condoms and lube, distractedly scattered them them on the bed, and returned to his spot between Levi's legs in record time.

“You're slow,” Levi said, cupping Eren's face in his palms and guiding him in for a kiss of slow, sliding tongue.

“You're impatient,” Eren said once he could pull away a fraction. His mouth dragged, hot and damp, to Levi's ear. He bit down on the delicate lobe, revelling in the small shock that shuddered through Levi's taut frame. Eren lapped at the sore spot, soothing, then nipped again because he didn't care to resist the urge.

If Levi wanted to be certain of Eren's existence, Eren would make it impossible to think otherwise. Levi would be able to look in the mirror and see Eren's ownership upon his skin.

“Idiot,” Levi said with a gasp, his hands rushing to Eren's jeans, frantic hands unzipping him, tugging at his belt loops and yanking until his jeans and boxers had slunk halfway down his ass. Levi's urgent, pink mouth bumped along Eren's jaw, found his lips, and steadily tore Eren's control apart anew. Clever fingers freed Eren's stiff dick from his open fly, knuckles brushing the hypersensitive underside before gripping the length, dry and tight, and slowly, deliberately began working his erection to a maddening hardness.

Eren gritted his teeth against the high, feral noise rising up his throat and hoarsely said, “Why'm I the idiot?”

He dragged his palms down Levi's sides, from underarms to hips, fingertips dipping along the strong curve of musculature, nails scraping the bows of his ribs. Gasping in Levi's ear as his wrist twisted and worked round his cock, Eren pulled back just enough to glide his hands down Levi's legs and clumsily slip off his shoes and socks without actually looking. The pad of Levi's thumb circled the head of Eren's dick, slicking pearls of cum around and down the hot, stretched skin.

Eren whimpered, his hands fumbling at the zip of Levi's slacks. Levi scooted to the edge of the bureau, more balancing against Eren now, their crotches bumping against each other, Levi's legs wrapping around Eren's ass.

“Because,” Levi rasped, bringing a hand up to roughly cup Eren's neck and tug him in. “Because I was supposed to end this.”

Levi kissed him once, hard, his eyes open, burning and smoky. “And you made it so I couldn't say no.”

“Sounds -” Eren licked Levi's mouth open, his hands working Levi's swollen dick forth from its snug confines. “Like you're the idiot.”
“Bullsh- ah -” Levi thumped his forehead on Eren's bare shoulder, inhaling sharply as Eren ripped Levi's pants and tight boxers down to his thighs, then scooped Levi up by the ass in a firm hold. Levi was forced to tighten his legs around Eren's waist as he completely took Levi's weight, and ducked his head for a furious, fiery kiss. Like hell Levi would ever say 'no' to Eren. He'd never give Levi the chance again.

Eren turned with Levi in his hold, grinning against Levi's mouth when steely thighs gripped harder at his waist. The glistening head of Levi's erection leaked warmly along Eren's stomach, while Eren's dick just brushed between Levi's slightly spread ass cheeks in Eren's hands. Eren briefly entertained the idea of fucking Levi up against the wall, but there'd be time for that yet. Right now, Eren wanted Levi to lose himself completely.

With an even wider grin, Eren caught Levi's hazy gaze, watched the split second of realisation, before tossing Levi onto the bed without the slightest hint of fanfare or romance. Levi bounced once, his legs splaying as far as his pants at his knees would allow and glowered up with a face flushed and indignant.

“Throw me again and I'll -”

“What?” Eren's smile had faded, his stare burning as he stepped from his remaining clothes and lunged at Levi. He gripped the hem of Levi's slacks and yanked, sending Levi tumbling flat onto his back while Eren whipped off the remaining layers that hassled them. “You'll -”

“Find out.” Levi's eyes narrowed to black slits, his expression profoundly menacing as he propped himself back on his elbows. His voice rumbled with warning, but his body spoke volumes, with his cock already heavy and full and bumping back against his dark happy trail. He reminded Eren of some kind of deadly, beautiful night flower that he just had to touch, even if it meant losing his life.

“What?” Levi snapped, his cheekbones staining a charming shade of pink while everything about him dared Eren to treat him like less than a super top. Eren realised he'd knelt on the bed on his hands and knees, straddling Levi's lap as he openly stared at this Levi desperately attempting to look anything but vulnerable.

“Nothing,” Eren said, his lips curving briefly. “Nothing you'd want to hear without having to punch me in the face.”

“Well, you already punched me in the face, so you're due one in return,” Levi murmured, his gaze narrowed and wary as he watched Eren lean in to sample one of Levi's nipples with a little lick. Levi's stomach quivered and his voice was tight. “Although, I did break a chair over your back.”

“S'that where the bruise is from?” Eren murmured against Levi's chest, grazing his teeth over the same nipple he was currently torturing. Levi's knee jerked in reaction, knocking Eren's hipbone with a short shock of pain.

“Don't,” Levi said in a trembling breath. “I'm -”

“Ticklish?” Eren said, biting back a squeal of glee as he peered up to meet Levi's eyes. He saw the raw desire, the ever present stubbornness, and the mist of confusion that clouded everything else. Was it really so foreign to Levi that someone would not only want to take pleasure in him, but play, too? Eren was no aficionado on sex, but he did appreciate that there was more to getting off than physical foreplay.

“Just how ticklish are you?” Eren said with a grin, his fingertips playfully skittering along Levi's ribs.
The answering gasp and red-faced glare was answer enough. “Are you gonna fuck me or play sleepover, kid?” Levi gritted out.

“It's possible to do both, y'know.” Eren sat back on his heels and considered Levi spread out before him, all delectable lines of muscle and and errant starlight freckles scattered here and there across his porcelain skin. Eren barely knew where to begin feasting.

*Just kidding.* In the last week or so, Eren had probably daydreamed every possible manner to have his way with Levi.

“But,” Eren began thoughtfully, his hungry stare following the path of his palms as they trailed down Levi's surprisingly thick thighs, caressed Levi's knees, and bent them so his feet were flat on the mattress. “I'm not really looking for laughs, either.”

Eren caught the shiver of Levi's stomach and the interested twitch of his cock, before Eren slipped down from the bed, his knees lightly hitting the carpet. He gripped Levi's ankles firmly and pulled him to the very precipice of the bed, his ass just teetering off the edge.

Chewing on his bottom lip from the pure, consuming hunger burning him from head to toe, Eren grabbed the backs of Levi's thighs, spread them, and buried his face between them. There was no warning as Eren plunged his tongue past that tight, twitching rim, but if the answering high-pitched gasp was anything to go by, Levi didn't mind.

Losing himself in this world of pleasing Levi, of doing something so right and perfect was intoxicating. Eren could spend his life making Levi happy, hearing his moans, and coiling him tightly around Eren's finger just to watch Levi spring apart all from his own skill. More than anything, it felt good to be good at something. However unintentional, Levi made Eren feel wanted, needed, appreciated. Eren couldn't imagine a better way to live.

Levi's thighs squeezed around Eren's head, his heels digging into the back of Eren's neck. There was little room to breathe, and Eren couldn't have cared less. The more Levi sweated and moaned and canted his hips against Eren's mouth, the messier and more frantic Eren's tongue became. He plunged it in wildly now, slicking that dripping hole with sloppy, lapping kisses. When his hand slid away from one of Levi's thighs, just to return and slip a long finger in to join Eren's tongue, Levi's hips flew straight off the bed.

“Holly -” Levi gasped, his back bowing up as Eren patiently, wetly worked him open with fingertips and tongue. “How did you – where -”

“Hey.” Eren popped his head up, his fingers still pumping and twisting with an easy, unrelenting rhythm. “Pass me that lube, will ya?”

Levi had one arm flung over his eyes. Breathing quick and shallow, his free hand blindly scoured the duvet for the small bottle. The forgotten laundry basket toppled to the floor. Eren straightened from where he’d sat back on his heels, reaching forward to snatch the lube from Levi's hand. Their fingers brushed and it felt more electric than such a touch had any right.

Returning to his place between Levi's now widely spread legs, Eren felt his throat go dry as he zeroed in on Levi's unfortunately ignored and obviously tortured cock. Heavy and dripping onto Levi's stomach, it practically begged for attention.

Eren's mouth watered as he tore his gaze away and fixed his concentration on slowly pulling the length of his fingers out of Levi. The guttural groan that rumbled deep in Levi's chest was sound enough to force Eren into pressing his palm against the base of his dick to keep from cumming on the
spot. For an ex priest, the man was fucking sinful.

“When was the last time you did this?” Eren said lowly, inwardly startling at how unrecognisable his voice was. He sounded like he'd run a mile, like he hadn't had a drink in days. He generously coated his fingers in lube, and without pause, slipping one straight in to Levi's loosening hole.

Levi's entire body went rigid, then melted against Eren's hand while Levi sighed, “I don't...”

“Don't remember or?” Eren bit down on his bottom lip, unable to look away from where his fingers slicked and stretched with glistening lube and sloppy, lurid sounds. Fuck, all he wanted to do right now was mount Levi like a animal and ram him senseless. And although patience wasn't his strongest suit, Eren did recognise that Levi couldn't have done this in a hell of a long time, so it would be like a first time all over again.

“Never – ah, fuck!” Levi's hips jerked as Eren crooked three fingers inside him. “I never – Jesus Christ, how long are you gonna -”

“What.” Eren sat up again, one hand resting high up Levi's inner thigh, his thumb just brushing the curve of balls, his other hand pausing their ministrations as Eren gawked at Levi's flushed face and dark, plump lips. “You – you what? You never? As in never ever? As in I'm -”

“The first person to have their fingers in my ass?” Levi snapped, settling on his elbows again to fume at Eren with rosy cheeks. “God, yes, it's so fucking romantic I'm gonna puke. Now, you gonna screw me or what, because I -”

Eren lunged forward from between Levi's legs, his hands gripping Levi's forearms tightly as he rushed in and captured that tempting, scowling mouth. The kiss was desperate, thrilling, almost giddy with the enthusiasm that spilled from Eren's tongue onto Levi's.

Mine, Eren said with every rough palming of Levi's arms, hips, thighs. His hands grew frantic and bruising, marking with everything in him, wanting to leave his fingerprints not just on Levi's willing body, but on his heart.

Eren loved the strong lines of Levi's figure, the strength of a soldier battling against Eren, all corded, straining muscles and lean limbs caging Eren closer and closer. When their legs were entangled and droplets of sweat dotted the small of Eren's back where Levi slicked his hands, Eren buried his face against the pale column of Levi's throat and simply inhaled.

Mine.

As if Levi had heard the word spoken aloud, he shivered in Eren's arms. His nails bit into Eren's shoulders, his swollen cock smearing obscene amounts of salty warmth onto Eren's belly.

“Eren,” Levi whispered, a small, subtle sound of surrender. “Please.”

“Yeah,” Eren said breathlessly as he straddled Levi's hips, sat up, and groped the rumpled blanket for the condom. His gaze burned hot and heavy on their dicks, and as he slipped the condom on, made sure his knuckles brushed and bumped the full length of Levi's erection. Levi hissed and arched his hips, his hands flung above his head, laid out before Eren in a way he knew Levi had never done for anyone else.

The thought spurred on Eren anew, boiled his blood until he thought he'd climb out of his skin if he didn't fuck Levi here and now. Red burst in Eren's eyes as he grabbed Levi by the hipbones and promptly flipped him over in one powerful lurch of strength.
“Head down,” Eren distantly heard himself say. His palm pressed the damp spot between Levi's shoulder blades, until Levi's cheek rested on the mattress. “Ass up,” Eren rasped, kneeling and yanking Levi's hips up and towards him.

Biting down on his lip, Eren ignored Levi's half-hearted grumbles into the duvet, instead choosing to massage his hands down Levi's asscheeks and spread them slowly, revealing Levi wet and ready for him. Releasing a shaky breath, Eren slipped the long length of his dick along the slick cleft, the head pushing and catching against Levi's rim in long, teasing strokes.

“Fuck,” Levi said on an exhale, his hands fisting in the blanket at either side of his head, his hips rocking back rhythmically. That was encouragement enough for Eren.

Eren lined his dick up with Levi's hole and firmly pushed, knowing the first part was the hardest – so to speak.

“Holy shit, holy shit,” Levi gasped, sounding more frayed and vulnerable than Eren had ever heard him. “No fuckin' way that's fitting, Eren, no wa – ah!”

“In,” Eren said breathlessly, subtly canting his hips into that tight, encompassing heat. He wasn't even halfway inside and Levi was already gasping for air, his face pressed right down into the bed so it looked impossible to breathe.

Swallowing hard, Eren dug his fingers into the delicate wings of Levi's hipbones and sunk in with painful patience, each inch slow and -

Levi snapped his hips back and took Eren in completely, the combination of the action and Levi's throaty moan stealing all the air from the room. Eren choked, unable to breathe around the blinding pleasure that seized him from top to toes. Levi was writhing against Eren's cock like an animal in heat, all glistening back and damp hair clinging to flushed cheeks, his lips red and parted.

Eren's sanity split and fractured, and he simply burst to pieces.

Teeth bared, Eren fucked Levi like it was the last thing he'd ever do. Everything was a blur of heat, of the loud, slick slap of hips, the blaze of desire encompassing them both. The air was thick between them, a fucking sauna dripping sweat from their thighs, the backs of their necks and knees.

Eren plunged into Levi once, bottoming out as he leaned forward, pressed his chest against Levi's slippery back and said near to his ear, “Mine.”

Levi stilled, his fingers flexing in the duvet.

“Eren.”

“I'm here,” Eren said, his voice cracking as he rocked his hips against Levi's. “I'm here, Levi.”

“Eren, just -”

Eren kissed a sensitive spot behind Levi's ear. “Kay.”

Resuming his position behind Levi, Eren pulled his entire length out, salivating at Levi's helpless little noise and the way he shamelessly swayed his ass from side to side in desperation for dick. This time Eren sunk to the hilt in one thrust, which was enough to have his eyes crossing. It wasn't long before he was fucking in earnest, each slippery push and shove more erratic than the next.

Only when Levi was unconsciously chanting Eren's name did Eren blindly reach around and cup
Levi's tight, swollen balls and give them a soft, little roll.

When Levi came from that touch alone with a strangled cry, Eren's jaw dropped in awe. He hadn't been prepared, hadn't known Levi could cum just from Eren's dick and his slight touch. The sudden, shuddering convulsion around Eren's cock paired with pure arousal from Levi's reaction had Eren erupting with a shocked gasp. His vision cut out to red as he dropped his forehead to the hot skin of Levi's back and rode out the thunderous impact of his abrupt orgasm.

The last thing Eren remembered was Levi bonelessly collapsing and Eren limply following.

“Oiy.”

Eren grunted and rolled.

“Oiy, you lazy shitbag, don't leak jizz on my fuckin' sheets.”

“Nnn?” Eren popped an eye open, found himself still laying horizontal across the bed, his feet hanging off the end as he was glared at by a ruffled-looking Levi.

“You – still – wearing – condom. Is that caveman enough for you?”

Eren grunted, his body loose and buzzing as he buried his face into the mattress, lifted his hips, and slid off and tied the condom.

“Whaddaya wan' me t'do with it,” he said to the sheets, his eyes blissfully shut again.

“Ugh. Just -” Levi snatched it away and there was some rustling as he shifted on the bed to toss the offending condom into the trash can.

It was to Eren's great surprise – but not surprised enough to move – that Levi actually returned to him. Instead of stretching out beside him, though, Levi settled his head on the dip of Eren's lower back, so that their bodies formed a T shape.

Eren hummed and turned his head, pillowing his cheek on one arm. “Make-up sex is good sex.”

“It's something, anyway,” Levi said under his breath.

Eren's lips curved. He didn't need Levi to say anything. He'd had confirmation enough of Levi's enjoyment earlier. In fact, if he was learning to read Levi well enough, the guy was probably grumping to himself over how he could have lost control so spectacularly. Eren didn't feel the need to rub it in. Mostly, because he was still on cloud nine.

“Eren...”

“Muh.”

“Just because you managed to distract me doesn't make me any less concerned for your well-being and my ability to effectively provide that for you.”

“So?” Eren scrunched up his face, annoyance bunching his shoulders. “I feel safer and in more control of myself when you're with me. So stay with me.”

“You only make it sound simple because you're so fucking simple.”

“Jesus Christ,” Eren snapped, shifting to sit up, knocking Levi off of him. Levi just rolled, remained on his back upon the bed, staring up at Eren with that purposefully blasé expression of his.
“How about this,” Eren said, looming over an unimpressed Levi. “Forget about your ego for a second and answer me honestly. If we split up, would it really change anything? What you feel for me? How you act towards me? You -”

You said you loved me.

Eren couldn't say it. Not when he was entirely sure that Levi had meant it at the time. People said a lot of things when they argued. Ran their mouths, exaggerated, all that.

“I mean,” Eren quickly backtracked. “You seriously believe saying the words ‘let's break up' would change us in any real way?”

Levi remained silent, watchful as Eren defiantly continued to meet his eyes.

With a sigh, Levi said, “You're such a little asshole, you know that?”

A weight lifted from Eren's shoulders and his grin was so wide that he saw Levi's lips quirk a little in reply.

“And you're stuck with me,” Eren said. He burst into motion now, flopping back on the bed beside Levi and turning to nuzzle Levi's ear.

“That right?” Levi said conversationally, rolling to his side and resting his cheek on his palm. His eyes were calm and grey, a softly lapping ocean that soothed Eren's soul.

“Mmhmm.” Eren leaned in and dropped a kiss on Levi's forehead. “Yours.”

Levi's eyes subtly widened, his adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard. His voice was rough and a little uncertain.

“Mine.”
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Okay, so here's the downlow. I've actually been packing to move me and my kid back to America (I live in the UK), so moving house while being a single parent has been just a weeeeee bit stressful, y'know? Just so you know where I've been. I'm moving a couple weeks, woo and yay but also EEP I AM NOT NEAR READY. So, that's been the entire deal with the hiatus.

Other than that, THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT. THANK YOU SO MUCH. I seriously want to hug every single one of you, and although I haven't been able to reply to everyone's comments recently, I take every single one to heart and truly appreciate them. They keep me going. Well, that, and my story demanding it be told, dammit! Please keep sending your support, you beautiful beautiful humans and spirits and sexy demons.

Remember, my Tumblr is atomicblonde.tumblr.com, please feel free to drop by!

The last question either of them wanted to consider was really the only thing worth saying now.

Eren remained stretched on his side, sheets pooled around his waist, his cheek pillowed on his open palm. He watched the subtle shift of muscle of Levi's pale back ripple and bunch as he stood and began to dress in quick, precise movements. For such a trim, compact physique, Eren knew the sheer strength and power reserved within him could easily overwhelm Eren's own body, despite their height difference.

Knowing that, a zing of pleasure sparked in Eren's chest as he truly grasped how much it must have meant to Levi to allow himself to be overpowered. The vulnerability in that left Eren with a silly grin on his face, and the question he'd meant to ask slipped away from forethought.

Levi turned, buttoning a crisp, dove grey shirt as he looked up. His eyes narrowed.

"Your face is making me sick."

"You're crazy about this face," Eren said, his expression growing goofy and smug.

"Smother yourself," Levi said, chucking a discarded pillow onto Eren's face.

Snickering, Eren sat up in bed and launched the pillow across the room to where Levi had crouched to pick up the things previously scattered from the bureau. The cushion smacked him in the back of the head and he shot a warning look over his shoulder, but Eren caught the brief quirk of his kiss-bruised lips before he returned to tidying.

After a joint-popping, feline stretch, Eren rolled from the bed and silently began to dress. He and Levi worked around each other in the warm, soft comfort of quiet, like a quilt fresh out of the dryer on a nippy autumn day. The world had been growing cold and dark around Eren for some time now. And with Levi of all people, there was a sturdy safehouse and a welcoming hearth.

But there remained an ice patch lingering at the back of Eren's neck, and prickles broke out across
his arms as he suppressed a shiver.

“Levi?”

Levi finished collecting the strewn laundry from the floor and dumped it in a heap in the basket he'd reset on the bed, before he looked up with guarded eyes.

Eren loosely hugged himself, his hands cupping his elbows as he cleared his throat. The question was a menacing hand around his throat, threatening to choke.

“We have to do it again, don't we?”

Levi's attention flicked to the bed.

Eren smacked Levi's chest with the back of his hand. “Not that, you fuckin' pervert. Exorcism – an exorcism. We have to do it again. Get it right this time.”

Levi caught Eren by the wrist and nodded, turning Eren's hand over to study the purpled bruises smudged across Eren's knuckles. He brushed the soft pad of his thumb across them – electric currents.

“We'll discuss the possibility with Erwin and your father, but in your condition, I wouldn't recommend it.”

Eren sputtered. “Wouldn't – recommend it? I – Levi, in case you haven't noticed, I've got some demon bitch queen using me as a throne! Can we please do something about that?”

“Stop being so fucking rash,” Levi said lowly, his fingers firmly cuffing Eren's wrist between them. Levelsly, he met Eren's heated gaze. “Think straight. I know you weren't technically there for it, but your body sure as hell was. I broke a chair over your back, Eren. All the while you were falling down deep into God knows where. You're not merely physically compromised, but spiritually as well. You need time. We need time. Time to plan our next move. Time to be smarter than an enemy who, by all accounts, can hear our every word.”

“But -”

“If you're not going to listen to someone who knows better, then why the fuck are you here, Jaeger?” Levi snapped, his eyes flashing like blades.

Eren clamped his mouth shut. Without thinking, he reached forward with his free hand and pressed his palm on Levi's chest, over his heart. A wild pulse slammed hotly beneath Eren's fingers. Quick, unsteady thuds as Levi evenly met Eren's wide eyes.

Frightened. Upset. Beneath the cool front was a storm, and it thundered for Eren's safety.

Eren softened, his lips parting to speak, when Levi released the hold on Eren's wrist and slipped past. He yanked the door open and looked over his shoulder, his eyes a little unfocused, hazy.

“Let's move out, kid.”

Biting back the urge to demand something more – he didn't know exactly what – Eren followed.

As they made their way towards the front of the house, Eren heard the door open, bags rustling, the door shutting again. Rounding the corner and stepping into the hall that led to the foyer, Eren barely had enough time to see Mikasa scatter her shopping bags to the floor before she was sprinting and
launching herself forward.

Mikasa's weight pummeled Eren as she enveloped him in a tight hug, her hair smelling of damp autumn leaves. Her cheek was cool against his, but her voice was warm and thick with emotion.

“Idiot, why didn't you tell me-” She went rigid as a corpse in Eren's arms, her breath halting against Eren's ear.

“Mikasa?” Eren's voice cracked as he pulled back, barely catching her by the armpits as she slumped to the ground. Wide, vacant eyes spilled over with tears, bloodshot veins bursting red and angry in the whites as the colour drained from her face.

“Mikasa? Mikasa!” Eren laid her on the ground as Levi crouched beside him to feel her pulse.

“Pulse is slow but stable.”

“What the hell's goin on? Mikasa!”

Thunder shook the ceiling, and only distantly did Eren recognise it as the sound of Bertolt and Petra rushing down the stairs.

“Move,” said Petra, who had appeared with surprisingly hard steel to her sweet voice. She didn't wait to argue with Eren, but instead physically jolted him aside with her shoulder as she fell to her knees.

Panic crushed Eren's ribs in over his heart as he helplessly looked on. Petra had immediately rolled Mikasa to her side. But there was an extra person in the room, Bertolt's gaping, looming figure aside.

Armin.

“Help,” Eren looked up, past the group and into the distance where the oddly blurry, underexposed imprint of Armin's figure stood. “Help. What's happening to her?”

“I don't know,” Petra said softly, her head lowered as she busily checked Mikasa's vitals.

“She touched you, didn't she?” Armin sounded far away, almost like the static of a bad connection. Alarm bells went ignored in favour of the mounting horror that shrieked in Eren's ears and scorched him like a lightning strike.

As if on cue, Mikasa shot up, head-butting Petra in the process. The scream which ripped from Mikasa's throat was that of a tortured victim, the kind pain Eren's mind could barely process as that tearing from human organs.

Mayhem ensued. Petra swore and slumped, her palm cupping over her nose as thick blood overflowed from her hand to dribble on the floor. Bert dropped to her side, and Levi quickly crouched to wrap his arms around Mikasa from behind, pinning her arms to her sides as she began to howl and flail. He successfully sat back and pulled her onto his lap as if she were a child. His expression was still as he kept her in a firm hold and murmured something in her ear that Eren couldn't hear over the heart-breaking wails.

“I'll take Petra,” Bert said lowly, having helped her to her feet. He didn't wait for Eren's reply as he rushed her from the room, towards the kitchen.

Eren just sat on the floor, mouth agape, eyes wide as he took in Armin's fading figure and Mikasa's tapering sobs. She had her face tucked against the starched collar of Levi's shirt, her tears soaking the
material translucent. Her hand was a claw in the fabric of Levi's chest, and he didn't seem a fraction concerned that she was rumpling him beyond measure in her distress.

"Eren," Mikasa said wetly, her eyes shut tight against the steady stream of tears that spilled over. Her arms were firmly latched around Levi like a lifeline as she uttered, "You..."

“What...” Eren's voice sounded rough and hollow, and he swallowed with a dry mouth and heavy tongue. What had he done to her?

“I felt you die! You died, Eren. But you're still here. H-how is that? I felt... I felt you drown. I tasted the blood in my mouth. I heard someone laughing. Was that – oh god – it was her. How do you – how are you here?”

“Shit.” Eren felt the colour drain from his face. Very briefly, his eyes flicked to Levi's, their gazes held, but Eren couldn't read Levi. Not now, at least. “Shit, Mikasa, I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to – nobody should have had to -”

“But you were going to fucking keep it to yourself?” Just like that, Mikasa was untangling herself from Levi's hold and struggling to her feet. She wavered briefly, but her deep, dark glare did not. “You told me you were going to be okay, and I believed you! What I just felt – what I just saw, was not okay, Eren. What if you hadn't come back, huh? I know we haven't known each other a lifetime, but we mean something to each other, don't we? So what if you hadn't come back from that? What would we have done? I can't -” Hot, angry tears shimmered in Mikasa's eyes. “I can't do that again.”

Without warning, Mikasa whirled on Levi, who was gracefully rising to his feet. “Do you hear me, Father? If you get another one of my friends killed, I am fucking coming for you.”

Levi's jaw hardened and twitched, but he remained painfully silent and met Mikasa's eyes with a level stare.

Eren floundered, gaping between the two of them. “Um, what -”

“I'm going out,” Mikasa snapped. She swept past Levi, and once at the door, turned on her heel and menacingly glowered at Eren from down the hall. “I can't be around you right now or I just may beat the shit out of you. But do something stupid like that again and I swear if Lilith doesn't finish you off first, I sure as hell will.”

The door slammed behind her, leaving Eren and Levi eyeing each other up with more questions than answers.

“What was she talking about?” Eren said, slowly getting to his feet. He spotted blood on the floor and remembered Petra in all of this.

“I could ask the same question,” Levi said coolly. “Care to explain?”

Eren had seen how torn up Levi had been just hours ago. How the weight of the exorcism gone wrong had hunched his shoulders. Eren had decided then that Levi didn't need to know what Eren had experienced when he'd fallen under. Nothing positive could come of it.

True, Eren had been shaken to the core by the incident. In fact, since he'd awoken he had purposefully ignored any accidental reminiscence his emotions may have tried on him. Mikasa hadn't been entirely accurate. Eren hadn't died once. He'd felt like he'd died a dozen times – two dozen. Each and every time he had felt his lungs pop, his throat burn for air, his screams go silent in favour for mouthfuls of blood. Eren knew what it felt like to die, and now he'd passed that harrowing
knowledge onto Mikasa.

He wouldn't do the same to Levi.

“I should check on Petra,” was all Eren said, unable to meet Levi's gaze. He fled to the kitchen before more could be said.

***

Avoiding Levi was fairly easy when it was growing apparent that he was attempting to achieve the same goal as Eren. It seemed that they both had matters which they had no interest in discussing. Unfortunately, Eren was beginning to realise that if he was aggravated with Levi for not coming out with his secrets, Levi probably felt the same, but vice versa. And here they were, avoiding being in the same room with each other.

Well, Levi would just have to deal, Eren decided as he slipped into a steaming hot bath. His body had been crying for relaxation for weeks, and staying out of Levi’s way had been an ideal time to soak in a tub until Eren was an ugly raisin. The quiet was merciful, and it seemed that tonight even the spirits were silent.

Eren slunk back and wet his hair, shifting until he could lean comfortably against the lip of the tub. The sweet slosh of water was music to his ears, and the bath soaked through to his aching bones and left his skin tender and bright pink. For the first time in a long time, Eren felt alone, in the very best way. No one whispering in his ears, no one laughing, no one crying.

“Eren.”

“JESUS.”

Eren jerked up in the bath, his butt slipping on the bottom and sliding him back down until he was gripping the sides of the tub and sputtering like a wet, angry animal.

“The fuck, Armin?”

“Sorry.” Armin's smile was sheepish from his spot atop the closed toilet seat. He looked bright and whole again – nothing like several hours earlier.

“You're gonna be the death of me,” Eren said as he swiped water from his eyes.

Armin's smile dropped like lead. “Don't say that.”

“Sorry. Er...” Eren looked around. “Do you... Is something up?”

“I need to discuss something with you.”

“While I'm in the bath or -”

“We both know you're rarely alone, these days.”

Eren could feel his cheeks go hot, and it had nothing to do with the bath. “Yeah, so?”

“I think it's wonderful,” Armin said, his eyes serene. “For both of you. It makes me feel like I can move on.”

Eren's head whipped up, his eyes widening. “What? Armin, you can't be ser-”
“First, I had stayed for Father Levi. These past weeks, I've stayed for you, as well.” Armin cocked his head and considered Eren. “But you two are good for each other. I don't see everything, but I see enough to know that you two have done and will do incredible things for each other.”

“You're serious about this,” Eren said, feeling his heart drop.

He didn't want Armin to go. They were connected, however inexplicably. Armin kept Eren grounded, kept him thinking straight and clear and true. How would he get through this without him?

As if reading his thoughts, Armin spoke soothingly.

“I have a plan.”

“Huh?”

“A plan. To finish this altogether.”

Eren sat up straight, his expression going still and his gaze fierce.

“Tell me everything.”

***

Feeling worn to the bone, Eren fell face first onto his bed with just a damp towel wrapped around his waist. He laid there, nose buried in a pillow that he wished smelled of Levi, and considered everything he'd heard.

In theory, Armin was on to something. In practice, it was dangerous. But wasn't every option, at this point?

The real difficulty laid in convincing Levi and the rest that this was the best and only plausible solution. Awesome.

With a sigh, Eren reached his arm out and blindly felt for the cellphone on his nightstand. He hadn't checked his messages since before the the exorcism, and he realised he hadn't heard from his dad since before then.

Nothing from Dad, but he had never been the biggest texter. Though where he had disappeared to after his own son's exorcism was a fucking mystery. Hanji was more likely to know.

There was a text from Mikasa saying, sorry, I was just upset.

Makes sense, Eren texted back, everything that's happened has been pretty hardcore.

In case you hadn't noticed, Mikasa replied immediately, the lot of us like to stick together. We're family.

I noticed. It's good.

Good.

With a weak smile, Eren tossed the phone aside, dropped his head to his pillow, and promptly passed out.

***
The fact that Eren slept through the night like a normal human and woke up at a regular time of morning had him feeling like a fucking rockstar. These days, it was the little things that counted.

Yes, he'd woken up cold and butt-naked with the towel on the floor and his wet hair had dried into the worst case of bedhead imaginable, but that was all whatever. Eren was determined to see this day head-on.

Tugging on a pair of snug boxers, Eren frowned at his clothes. He really did need to drop by the house and get more stuff. Maybe he'd do that this morning. If Levi wanted to drive him, they could at least make up and move on. Eren had no interest in coming out about his experiences in the not-so-great beyond, but they could come to a truce or something.

Throwing on his ripped jeans – since was there a rip under one asscheek? - and plaid flannel shirt, Eren tucked his necklace into his clothes and searched the room for socks. The skeleton key was warm and comforting against his skin – a piece of his mother and, admittedly, a piece of Lilith. And, once more, the key would serve a purpose, in time. With any luck, it would close the door which it had opened long ago.

Properly dressed, Eren strode into the hallway, both hands busy diving into his hair and scraping it back into a high, stubby half-ponytail. Hairstyle. Haircut and clothes, he reminded himself.

With a frown, Eren wandered into the dining room and found it empty. That was strange. Around this time, everyone would be gathered around the table for breakfast, before Annie dashed off to school, Mikasa headed to college, and Bertolt – where was he? Where was Levi and Erwin, for that matter?

“Hellooo?”

“In the kitchen,” came Levi's voice.

Squaring his shoulders and telling himself that they could just forget yesterday's questions ever existed, Eren strolled into the kitchen with his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Where is everyone?”

Levi was sat on one of the stools at the island, ankles crossed as he casually leaned one elbow on the countertop and slouched over the morning newspaper. Strangely enough, a cafetiere of freshly pressed coffee sat in front of him, a half-finished cup near Levi's hand. He never drank coffee.

Suddenly Eren felt a little guilty that Levi may have had a particularly rough night without him, while Eren had dropped into a dead sleep at what was probably eight in the evening.

Levi peered up from the paper, his dark, thin eyebrows low and his mouth sober. “Annie's obviously scared of you, so she left early. I presume Mikasa is at Jean's, and Bertolt left with Erwin a little while ago to visit home and update his parents on his progress.”

“Oh.” It stung that Annie was frightened of Eren, but at the same time it made sense. As blasé as this household could be about the supernatural, everything about Eren's situation was serious and frightening.

“Have you heard from my dad?” Eren asked, heading for the fridge, even though he was never particularly hungry these days.

From the corner of his eye, he caught Levi looking up from his paper and actively watching Eren's movements as Eren searched out a bottle of water and cracked the cap off. When Eren turned
around, though, Levi's attention was firmly glued to the paper.

“Nope.”

“Weird,” Eren said under his breath. Both this atmosphere and his dad's disappearance. “Hey, think you can drive me to my house so I could pick up some more stuff? My dad didn't exactly pack my usual clothes.”

Levi eyed Eren's attire with a critical air. “Hipster lumberjack?”

“Hardy-har,” Eren said dryly, but a smile crept into his voice as he carefully approached Levi's side. With playful grin, Eren bumped shoulders with Levi and nuzzled the delicate shell of Levi's ear. “You gonna give me that ride?”

Levi's shirt sleeves were crisply rolled to the elbow, and it only widened Eren's smile to see goosebumps freckle the length of Levi's forearms.

“Sure,” Levi said evenly, casually turning the page of the paper.

_Uh oh_. So maybe the pretend-it-didn't-happen method didn't work with Levi, as Eren had previously assumed. New tactics.

“So,” Eren said, taking a wary step back from Levi's tense shoulders. “I've got an idea I wanted to run by you on what we should do next.”

“That so?” Levi said, without looking up.

“Yeah. I wanted to share with everyone, but you first. Maybe after we stop at the house?”

“If you say so, kid.”

“Oh, there's a fucking list. Top of them being your not telling me that aside from having an out of body experience with a hefty side of trauma, you actually experienced what you thought was your own death. Literally the most terrifying experience for any human on this earth and you didn't even think to mention it.”

Eren balked, then threw his hands up in the air and let them drop in defeat.

“What did you want me to say? There's really a never good time to mention that or anything. And maybe I would have gotten around to it, eventually.”

“Don't lie, you little shit.”

The only sign of Levi being riled was the flush of his cheeks and the arctic chill brightening his eyes.
He slid from the stool, dropping down to his lower height – but, as usual, seemed to take up the entire room.

“Okay, well, even if I didn't tell you -”

“You really think you can carry the weight of this situation on your own?” Levi said, each word like a sharpshooter's bullet. “Because you can't, and you shouldn't try.”

“Levi, I -”

“I'm right here, Eren. Jesus fucking Christ, how else do I need to say it? Yesterday you told me you were here. Well, so am I, so get used to it you fucking brat.”

Eren gawked. Levi glared.

They met in the middle, their lips crashing together like men starving. Arms ensnared each other, palms searching out spans of soft, warm skin and shifting muscle, fingertips digging into sensitive flesh and nails nipping with need.

Without parting mouths or untangling tongues, Levi walked Eren back, back until he smacked against an unforgiving counter. Levi's kiss was both brutal and heart-wrenchingly reassuring. The way his hands locked at the nape of Eren's neck to keep him close, the slide of his thigh between Eren's legs, the little hum of approval at the back of Levi's throat when Eren sighed and relaxed into him.

When Eren's lips pulsed hot and full with the force of Levi's mouth, and Levi's chin was red from the scrape of Eren's shadow of stubble, they parted enough to meet eyes. Levi's palms cupped Eren's face as if he were something precious, but his eyes were stormy rather than calm or gentle.

“I'm extremely tempted to smack you.”

“Try it and you'll be flat on your ass, buddy,” Eren said without a hint of malice, his eyes laughing.

“Seriously. I'm starting to dislike you more and more often.”

“Now who's the liar?” Eren said, slouching in to touch his nose to Levi's. Levi had the cutest, dainty nose – not that Eren would say so because he would like to keep his balls all the way into old age.

Levi looked horrified by the action. With one great push off Eren's chest, he turned away and stomped from the kitchen.

“I'll get the keys,” he said in a choked voice.

Despite everything, Eren just had to laugh.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

HEY, LOVES! I hope you're all doing good. I'm doing hectic house moving crap. It's as it sounds, crappy. But so it goes! Enjoy this chapter and remember to feel free to chat with me at atomicblonde.tumblr.com!

“I wonder if my dad will be home,” Eren said, leaning his temple on the cool window. Rain speckled the glass, distorting the outside world into irregular, grey speckles and smears.

“Get your fucking shoe off my dash,” Levi said, giving Eren's calf a hard shove.

With a sigh, Eren dropped his foot as he looked down at his phone and scrolled through his texts once more. Definitely nothing from Dad.

Chewing on his bottom lip, Eren dropped a text to Mikasa, just asking how she was holding up. He then texted his father, blatantly asking, where r u??? Eren pocketed his phone and flicked on the radio, tuning it to the top hits station.

“Your music is shit,” Levi said, speeding through a wet, residential road.

“And you're a snob,” Eren said easily.

“You're obno-”

Eren dived in and pressed his curved lips to the sensitive shell of Levi's ear.

Levi startled for a second, his face going pink, then shot a glare Eren's way and batted at him with his free hand.

“Don't touch me,” he muttered, bringing his attention back to the slick road.

“You love it,” Eren said cheerfully, trying to keep himself in good spirits, despite the growing concern of his father's whereabouts. If there was one thing he was learning, it was that Levi's presence brought him some sense of peace and happiness – especially when Eren was harassing him.

“I don't,” Levi said shortly, and turned up the radio with the sharp flick of wrist.

Eren grinned to himself and sang along to crappy-awesome pop hits for the remainder of the ride.

Before long, Levi squealed into the driveway and slammed the brakes, shoving the gears into park. Eren frowned up at his drab little house.

“His car's not here. He must be out somewhere.”

Levi said nothing, and they both got out of the car in tandem and approached the house. Eren unearthed his house key from his pocket and held the door open for Levi, who gave him a sour look in return, but entered first anyway.

“Does your father have a history of disappearing unexpectedly?” Levi said as he walked through the
“Honestly? Yeah,” Eren said as headed down the hallway towards his bedroom, just assuming Levi would follow. “I always thought it was his work as, like, a scientist or whatever. I guess now I know it was a little more than that.”

“And probably more urgent,” Levi said, trailing behind Eren as they entered his room. “Spirits and demons wait for no one.”

“You'd be surprised,” Eren said, without really thinking. He busied himself with tossing a large gym bag on his still unmade bed and rummaging through a chest of drawers for his usual clothes. “Waiting is almost all I see spirits doing.”

“You saw someone last night during Mikasa's episode, didn't you?” Levi asked. His back was to Eren, his interest seemingly on the bookshelf which held an array of fantasy and science fiction novels.

Eren stilled for just a moment, staring hard at Levi, before he continued with his packing. He took a deep breath.

“How did you know?”


Eren considered that for a moment as he rummaged through his sock and boxers drawer.

“Is it... creepy?”

“You don't scare me, Eren,” Levi said, throwing an even stare over his shoulder.

Eren shrugged and looked away.

“Maybe I should.”

“Maybe you should shut up and finish packing. This house is extremely depressing.”

“Gee, thanks,” Eren said dryly, but the corner of his mouth curved in a hesitant smile.

Levi continued to make a slow circle of Eren's room, pausing to inspect a photograph or a post-it note Eren had long ago scribbled to himself about something or other.

From Eren's periphery, he caught Levi freezing in place at Eren's bedside, his stare growing in intensity as he peered down at a photo of Eren and his mother.

“This is your mother?” Levi said, not touching the frame. He hadn't touched a single thing in the room, yet.

“Can you tell?” Eren said with a small smile, knowing full well and taking pride in the fact that he looked like her.

“She's beautiful,” Levi said, still inspecting the picture. “You two are alike.”

Eren stilled the process of zipping up his bag and looked up, eyes wide. He'd heard that right, hadn't he? Levi had just called him beautiful. Eren felt his face go hot, just as Levi turned and met his stunned gaze.
“Can I kiss you?” Eren said softly.

“You're asking?” Levi said with a slight sneer.

“Kay,” Eren said breathlessly, already closing the space between them, and enveloping Levi in his arms.

Levi melted willingly in Eren's embrace, his own arms linking around Eren's waist and holding tight against the onslaught of Eren's mouth. But Levi was never one to be passive. He nipped at Eren's lips as if starved for them, slipped his hands into the tight waist of Eren's jeans and cupped his ass, yanking him in close to mindlessly rut against each other.


“Jesus,” Levi said gruffly, his fingertips digging into the flesh of Eren's ass as he pierced him with a hot poker stare. “Now?”

“Uh huh.” Eren was already rushing to release Levi, reaching between them to undo his own belt and yank down his zipper. “Fast, okay? Just take me however you -”

Levi was already whirling Eren around and pushing him onto the bed. While Eren couldn't see Levi, he could feel the waves of intensity that rolled off of him, pressing against the small of Eren's back. Eren bit back a groan of anticipation and quickly shoved down his jeans and boxers to his knees, lifting his ass in the air and pressing his cheek against the mattress. His jeans left him little room to spread his legs completely, but that didn't seem to bother Levi in the slightest.

The hard, burning length of Levi's dick slicked along the cleft of Eren's ass, just bumping, teasing his otherwise untouched hole. Eren whimpered without shame and swayed his hips a little for Levi.


A hard smack resounded across Eren's asscheek and he yelped at the jolt of burning pleasure that seared beneath his skin.

“Stay,” Levi said lowly, his voice stern and deeper than usual.

“Always,” Eren said, his mouth muffled against the blankets. He remained in position, listening to Levi fumble with the bedside table, pop the cap on the lube, coat his fingers.

Before Eren could take a deep breath in preparation, Levi jolted a finger into his ass with perfect, devastating precision. Eren bit down on the sheets, his hands fisting in the covers, but it wasn't enough to halt the shameless moans that Levi pushed from him.

It wasn't long before Eren was rocking back on Levi's hand like an animal in heat, his tongue betraying him by chanting Levi's name over and over. And when Eren was begging for the next finger and the next, Levi pushed them forth with a brutal purpose that left Eren's thighs shaking and his breath shivering out in broken hitches.

“Now now now.” Eren gasped as Levi slipped his fingers away, only to be replaced by the head of his cock. “Hard,” Eren said fiercely, his throat burning with want. “Fuck me hard.”

“That shameless fuckin' mouth of yours,” Levi murmured, sounding husky and distracted as he palmed Eren's asscheeks in either hand and roughly buried the crown of his cock into Eren.

“Levi,” Eren gritted out between his teeth as he slowly eased his hips back to take Levi's dick to the
“Don't move,” Levi said suddenly, grabbing Eren by the waist and slamming him back against his cock in one forceful thrust.

Eren cried out, his back arching against that filling burn. But there was no time, no second to relish the moment. Levi sped up with short, blunt pumps that broke Eren down the centre and left him at a loss for words, for breath.

Levi's fingertips bruised Eren's hips, dug in, marked and claimed him, used Eren's body as leverage in order to shove him more firmly and fully back against Levi's cock. Quickly, the pace increased, the wet sounds of Eren's ass slapping back against Levi's hips, their mingling gulps of breath, the enthusiastic creak of the bed.

The din of their fucking was a roar in Eren's ears, so much so that he missed what Levi said as he slipped his hand around to grip Eren's slippery, leaking erection.

“Levi – god, fuck – what?”

“Beautiful,” Levi said between huffs, pounding in earnest, his fist jacking Eren's dick with single-minded purpose.

Control snapped and sparked, firecrackers popping behind Eren's tightly closed eyes as he cried out and came with a full body shudder, from toes to fingertips. Levi's hand stroked Eren through his orgasm with surprising gentleness, then squeezed and held as Levi quickly followed with a shiver, his forehead resting on Eren's back as he released a long, uneven breath that tickled Eren's skin. Eren collapsed to the mattress and Levi followed atop him like a dead weight.

“I'm -” Eren licked his chapped lips and swallowed. “I'm pretty sure sixteen year old me would never have believed what I just did or with who on this bed. Or my eighteen year old self. Or twenty,” Eren said with a laugh that josted Levi on top of him.

“S'that supposed to mean?” Levi said as he trailed a lazy, warm palm and delicate fingers down Eren's side.

Eren hummed with pleasure, but was too fucked-out to gravitate towards the touch.

“Just you,” Eren said, his throat scratchy. “Being amazing and a million miles out of my league.”

Levi's hand stilled its idle stroke.

“You're ridiculous.”

With that, he lurched off Eren with a grunt and stood to take care of the condom and zip himself up. He hadn't taken off a single item of clothing in Eren's rush to fuck.

“How?” Eren said as he got up and tugged his jeans over his hips. He felt loose and glowing and wonderful. For an ex-priest, Levi had some mind-blowing sexual instincts.

“Kid,” Levi began as he headed to Eren's bag and finished zipping it up. “You haven't got a clue.”

Eren frowned, fixing Levi with a stubborn stare.

“By all means, enlighten me.”

Levi shrugged, picked up the duffel and tossed it to Eren.
“You've got everything in front of you. I'm a washed up old man who has lost his profession and direction in life.”

Shocked, Eren could only blink and stare. Levi rolled his eyes and waved him off with sigh, marching from the room.

“Wait!” Eren snapped out of him and caught up. “That's ridiculous. You're not old, you do have direction – you help people every single day and leave no time for yourself – and on top of that, you are literally the coolest guy I have ever met.”

Levi stopped in the kitchen and stared at Eren blandly.

Eren threw his hands up.

“Don't you know that? How amazing you are? Anyone would want to be with you. I just got lucky, somehow.” Eren scratched his head and smiled sheepishly at his outburst. “I mean, I still don't get it. You and me. But I'm not complaining.”

Levi's surveyed Eren silently, pale gaze flicking from head to toe. Then he jerked a thumb towards the kitchen counter.

“You've got mail.”

“Huh?” Eren looked in the direction in which Levi had gestured and noticed a short stack of mail addressed to him. Probably bills and crap.

With a sigh, Eren swept them up under his arm.

“I should check the mailbox. If he hasn't been home in a day or two then there ought to be something there.”

“Check is bedroom,” Levi said.

“Nah. His room never looks lived in anyway. He's never been big on sleep.”

“Same with you.”

“Hey, mine is because I'm a freak of nature,” Eren said with a grin. “His is because -”

“You're not a freak,” Levi said. “You have a gift.”

Eren felt his cheeks heat, but he laughed it off and made a beeline for the front door.

“Believe me, it doesn't feel like that most of the time.”

Still, Eren wouldn't get rid of it. Not really. If his gift could help people like his mother, or families like himself and his dad, then some good could come of this. But first, Eren had to survive.

A soft spray of rain greeted Eren as he stepped outside and approached the mailbox. He winced a little and readjusted his heavy duffel, recalling once more that Levi had broken a chair over his back recently. Maybe he shouldn't have asked Levi to fuck him so hard, after all.

Just kidding. Totally worth it.

Frowning, Eren dropped open the mailbox door and pulled out a hunk of mail. Well, that answered that question. He flicked through it and, finding nothing but junk mail, just shoved it under his
armpit. With his head ducked and his nape growing damp, Eren rushed back to Levi's car, opened the back door, threw his bag in, then got in the passenger's seat.

He sighed and met Levi's eyes, dropping the pile of mail on the wet floor.

“Junk,” Eren said.

“We'll figure it out,” was all Levi said, and Eren found himself believing it.

The radio remained off on the ride back. Eren sifted through his mail and only opened the things of interest.

“Huh,” Eren said with fairly little interest as he tossed a read letter to the floor with the junkmail. “I've been fired. Guess sick leave can only last so long, even with a doctor's note, huh?”

“You wouldn't have been able to go back to that,” Levi said, his voice low, soothing.

“Yes.”

“Once a person experiences this life, experiences the other side to some extent, they find it extremely difficult to go back to their old lives.”

“Unless you're simple, like Jean,” Eren said with a slight curve of lips. He tilted his chin, his throat exposed as he leaned against the headrest.

“Basically.”

“Before,” Eren said, pausing to swallow and shut his eyes. “When you were talking about how I, I dunno, shouldn't be with you or whatever. It's kind of like how you said.”

“Don't be so fucking vague.”

“It's just that now I've lived a life with you in it, I know there's no living without you... in it.”

Silence filled the car, but it didn't make Eren all that nervous. Sure, he would like a reply, an affirmation of their feelings for each other. What normal person didn't want that?

At the same time, Eren felt he could wait. His patience had never been something to write home about, but for this – for Levi – Eren would wait.

Eren must have dozed off shortly after, because when he next came to, it was to the indistinct murmur of Levi's voice. He groaned and rubbed his eyes with the heels of hands.

“Oiy, Sleeping Beauty. Did you hear a word I said?” Levi snapped.

“Uhhh...” Eren offered a smile. “Yes?”

“You didn't,” Levi said, a scowl darkening his face. “Fuck's sake, you're useless.”

Eren blinked, then recalled the last thing they'd talked about. Wait, did it this have something to do with what Eren had said?

Shooting up in his seat, Eren twisted to avidly face Levi.

“Wait, hold on, were you talking to me about -”
“No,” Levi said with a reddening face. “I wanted to know if you wanted to go somewhere.”

“Uh...eh?”

“For fuck's sake,” Levi said under his breath as he kept his eyes fixed on the road. “What do you like to do to relax? After everything, you need to relax. Your body needs to recuperate.”

“Levi, are you asking me on a date?” Eren said with a slow smile.

“Not even remotely,” Levi replied flatly. “But I don't know shit about you, so I figured it's worth asking.”

Absolutely charmed, Eren grinned brightly at Levi's grumpy profile.

“I mean,” Levi said, his knuckles white around the steering wheel. “Looking at your room... I didn't recognise anything from it. I wouldn't have tied any of it to you, because I don't really -”

“You do know me,” Eren said simply. “All that back there is just stuff. Tastes, preferences. We've lived together for a pretty good chunk of time, and literally every day of that we have been together in some way or other. You know me. You know the important shit, just like I know yours.”

“Not all of it,” Levi said.

“Don't be depressing.”

“So, where are we going, kid?”

“You really wanna know what I do in my freetime?” Eren said, sliding a glance Levi's way.

Levi met his gaze for a second, his brow arching.

“Why do I get a feeling I'm not going to approve.”

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“This wasn't what I had in mind when I said you needed to relax,” Levi said darkly.

“And yet,” Eren said, sweeping a hand to gesture from Levi's head to toe, “here you are.”

“Because in your condition you'll probably faint in the middle of the fucking forest.”

“Okay, one, I don't faint, I pass out. Two...” Eren said as he strolled up to Levi and draped his arms over Levi's shoulders and leaned in until their noses brushed, “You're just worried this'll turn into a race and I'll beat you.”

The little forest preserve had been fairly easily to find once Googled off Eren's phone. When he hadn't been filling his boring days with his job at the gym and school, Eren had run. He ran a lot. There was something about the freedom and the rush that made it addictive. A treadmill just never did what the outdoors could do for Eren, either.

So, they'd made a pitstop at home and changed into some running gear – Levi grumbling the entire time – and headed to the trails.

Sore back or not, Eren was absolutely buzzing.

Levi, on the other hand, placed his hand over Eren's face and pushed.
“Don't even try to race me, kid.”

“Oh?” Eren walked backwards, bouncing on his heels, revved up as he grinned. “Why's that, old man?”

A spark snapped in Levi's eyes as their gazes met – and just like that, Levi was off, sprinting down the trail.

Eren whipped around with a smirk as he watched Levi go, and then it was on.

Thick, damp foliage whizzed by as Eren fought to catch up. The crunch and crack of his feet pounding sticks and stones fuelled the fire in Eren's blood as he came up alongside Levi, who had slowed down to a reasonably fast-paced jog. They glanced at each other, Eren grinned, Levi stoney-faced but clearly enjoying himself or else he wouldn't be doing it in the first place. Their breathing huffed in time with the other's, their steps in line like a sweat-inducing dance.

A faint mist started up once more, though the canopy of tangled trees did well to shelter them from most of the damp. Neither of them spoke, and Eren found himself falling into that meditative state which inevitably fogged over during a long-distance run.

Eren's mind turned inwards to the trials of the previous days. He swallowed hard as the familiar taste of blood filled his mouth – just for a moment, then gone. Lilith would never again pull him down into the pit again. It wasn't just fear that drove Eren to cling to this, but a pure belief in himself. In Levi, in Erwin – and, especially in Armin. Because it was Armin who would pay the biggest price for what was to come, and Eren had to believe in him. Had to believe it would all work out as planned.

What was it that Lilith had countless times whispered into his dreams?

*Her gates are gates of death. None of those enter there will ever return, and all who possess her will descend into the Pit.*

Well, Eren had visited that pit of blood and black. He'd walked past Lilith's gates of death and had crashed back out, alive and kicking. Eren had proved her wrong, proved the devil wrong. And he'd do it again.

As if on cue, a throaty laugh sounded in Eren's ears. It was right beside him, as close as Levi.

Without thinking, Eren whirled, his eyes bulging as he tripped over his own foot and went skidding across the forest floor. His arm burned and stung, but was barely registered as Eren scoot back and further back until his shoulders slammed into the rough bark of a tree trunk.

“Eren? What's wrong?”

Levi was at his side, maybe in his face, Eren didn't know.

Eren reached out, placed a hand on Levi's shoulder and *shoved*.

He recognised that laugh. It wasn't Lilith, not this time.

It was his *mother*.

Wordlessly, Eren scrambled to his feet and ran into the deep, dark forest.

*Mama?*
Chapter 32

Brittle branches tore at Eren's face as he scrambled through the barbed undergrowth. His lungs burned as he swallowed down the taste of cinders and the stench of sulfur. With his eyes burning and blurring in unchecked panic, Eren remained fixed on the grey figure flickering between the trees like flashes of moths wings fluttering just out of his periphery.

"Mom? Mom, please!"

This was all Eren had wanted. Again and again he'd dwelt on the question. Why could he see, communicate, with so many spirits, but not the one that mattered?

But she was here now, just shy of Eren's reach. If he could get to her, just speak to her for one minute, just touch her hand or experience one final embrace of his mother's arms...

Eren dragged the back of his bloodied hand across his damp eyes and boosted into a sprint, desperation whipping sharply at his heels.

The ground tilted beneath Eren's feet, his knee shrieking in pain as he thundered into a mossy boulder and dropped like a stone. His jaw cracked on the ground, his tongue bursting thick blood into his mouth as Eren bit down on the soft flesh.

Still, Eren struggled to a crouch, his gaze hot on the blood-spattered forest floor. Each breath scorched his throat as he swallowed iron and looked up through the spiderweb of foliage. A dull, foggy static sizzled between two gnarled trees.

"M-mom?" Eren said softly, only vaguely conscious of the hot trickle of blood that veined down the corner of his mouth.

"Eren," said the soft, wavering voice. His mother's voice.

His knees buckling beneath him, Eren stood, his eyes bulging as he focussed on the solidifying vision of his mom.

She looked exactly as Eren remembered her. Loose, thick hair the same shade as his own in a fat braid over one shoulder. Though her entity seemed to fizzle in and out of existence every few seconds, her large doe eyes still reflected that quiet eloquence in ocean blue. She was more slight than he could recall – petite, even. Had she been alive, Eren would have easily been able kiss the top of her head.

His heart lurched with a sickening weight against his ribs.
“Is it -” Eren's voice cracked, and he swallowed hard as he made his wavering approach. “This is real, right?”

“As real as anything, these days,” Mom said with what might have been a lilt of humor to her voice. Her lips curved while her image scattered and regrouped once more.

Eren briefly wondered why her image was so weak, but the thought snapped from consciousness as he watched his mother hold out a pale hand and unfurl slim fingers, wedding ring included.

"Take my hand."

“Why're you here? I mean -”

Too many questions scraped at Eren's brain for release and none could escape coherently.

“Take my hand, baby,” his mother cooed in a voice like a lullaby. Her greyish mouth curled at the corners.

Eren's eyelids felt weighted, lulled low by the sound of his childhood. By the memory of home, love, belonging. He was tired, so tired. He wanted to curl into his mother's arms and never wake.

“I miss you,” Eren rasped, words damp with emotion, his vision shimmering and wet. “I miss you so much, Mom. Every day.”

“Eren,” Mom said softly. She sounded so distant, so far, despite standing right before him. Like she was in some deep well he could never reach. But her palm remained offered, seemingly so attainable. “Please let me hold you.”

Eren's head was swimming, reeling like he hadn't slept enough or he'd drank too much.

“Yeah,” he said on a long, shaky breath. “Okay.”

Eren stepped forward, into his mother's outstretched arms.

Something slammed into Eren with the force of a car crash, sending him sprawling to the forest floor before he could make physical contact with his mother. The immediate rage that snapped through Eren broke through his daze like a lightning storm.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Levi said, his normally controlled tone breathless and raising loud enough for the forest to hush in fear.

Levi dropped to his knees and sharply snapped his fingers before Eren's face. “Where are you, Eren? What the hell were you thinking, running off like that? Hey... Hey!”

But Eren wasn't with Levi. He gaped over Levi's shoulder, his face heating in mounting panic and anger when he saw no sign of his mother.

“Mom? Mom!”

Eren scrambled to his feet, nearly knocking Levi into a bush as he bumped past him in desperate, hasty search.

“Mom!”
“Mom?” Levi snapped, his movements rustling from behind, just before he grabbed Eren's arm hard. “No one is here, Eren.”

“Because of you,” Eren said with a hiss, rounding on Levi with bared teeth, even as he swayed unsteadily on his feet. “She was right fucking here and you -”

“You looked like a goddamn corpse, Eren.” Levi squeezed Eren's arm with bruising force. “You were white as a sheet, your eyes glazed over like some dead fish as you walked towards fuck knows what. I've never seen you like that.”

Levi's voice quieted, maybe even shook a little as he searched Eren's furious face. “Never. Whatever happened just now was not normal. You don't feel that? You didn't notice? Come on, Eren, you're not fuckin' stupid.”

Gritting his teeth until his jaw sang, Eren stared down Levi's steely gaze. His breathing, once labored with frustration and heavy huffs, slowed as he sifted through what had just happened with a clearing mind.

“But it was my mom,” Eren said weakly, his shoulders sagging. “You stopped me from... from -”

“From what?”

“I dunno.” Eren searched Levi's expression and saw nothing but support and patience, despite the thin set to his lips and bunched-up brows. “I mean. She just wanted to hug me.”

“Yeah, sure. So why did you look like you belonged in a morgue instead of on your in feet? You looked dead, Eren. To your knowledge, has that ever happened before?”

“I just – I don't know, okay?”

Eren jerked from Levi's hold and roughly raked his hands through his hair.

“I don't – I can't think.”

Why wasn't Mom still here? Plenty, if not nearly all, of the spirits he had interacted with had appeared or remained while in the presence of other living people. His mother had lured – no, that was too sinister a word. Mom had led Eren away from the trail. And why? To tell him a secret? That wasn't necessary. No one else could see her.

So, why? And why now? Why any of this?

“Eren,” Levi said lowly, reaching out to briefly brush his fingertips over Eren's elbow. “Do you seriously believe what you saw was your mother?”

Eren didn't reply.

Levi's pale lips thinned.

“Because you looked half-dead and still walking to me. What kind of thing would do that to you?”

“I... don't know.”

It stung to admit his uncertainty. Eren's heard clenched and dropped to think he may not have had his one deepest wish come true at all.

“I know what it looked like to me,” Levi said, place his hands on Eren's shoulders, steadying him.
When Eren finally, tentatively, made eye contact him over the slow span of a minute, Levi said, “That's what demon possession can look like.”

***

Could it seriously have been Lilith?

Eren dragged his feet as they exited the car and made for the house. A cold drizzle sluiced, unnoticed, down Eren's spine and slicked away the grime and mud which had caked to his skin. His mouth tasted like blood and his eyes burned with tears stubbornly unshed.

Had that really been Lilith all along?

Had she been projecting straight from his mind and into the real world? Had Eren needed to physically embrace her to make their connection complete? If that was the case – and Eren desperately did not want to acknowledge it, but he was no fool either – then Lilith needed to be gone, and fast.

There was always Armin's plan.

Hell, there was only Armin's plan.


Eren blinked and realised he'd been prostrate on the porch step, simply staring into the doorway. Levi stood there, his dark brows tightly knitted. His hair sparkled with rain.

“Sorry,” Eren said, shaking off the gloom and escaping into the warmth and light of home.

“Go to my room,” Levi said brusquely, not making eye contact as he bent to remove his damp sneakers. “Strip down and get under the blankets. Warm up. I'll be in shortly.”

“Yeah,” Eren said wearily. That's all he could make out anyway.

He trudged past Levi and made for the bedroom.

Eren's movements were a blur of autonomy. Strip shirt. Shorts, boxers, socks. Under the blankets. Curl up. Blanket over his head. Eren sighed deep from within his cocoon.

Had that really been Lilith?

It had felt so real.

It had also felt so cold, so dizzying and exhausting. Almost like a spell.

Eren gnawed viciously on the inside of his cheek.

There clearly was no time for rehabilitation. No rest when the wicked was involved. Levi could harp on all he wanted about Eren unwinding and physical recuperation. The truth was that Lilith had Eren wound around her finger and he was either going to be pulled in or snapped off. Neither would be a pleasant experience, but at least the latter would give Eren his freedom.

When was the last time he had breathed in without the weight of the world crouched upon his chest with gnarled fingers clenched around his throat?

Eren must have drifted, because moments later he was snorting awake and squinting into the half-
Levi sat on the edge of the bed, his expression as frozen as the fingers that had been sifting through Eren's tousled hair.

“Hey,” Levi said with a rough grittiness to his voice. His hand slipped from Eren's head and left him feeling barren.

“Hi.”

Eren looked around the gloomy room. He stretched his arms languidly over his head as he spoke.

“Time's it?”

“Little after five. How're you?”

“Confused,” Eren said quietly, meeting Levi's eyes in the shadows.

Levi remained difficult to read, even at the best of times, but his eyes did look a little sad, despite their ever present intensity.

Eren swallowed with difficulty, his throat dry.

“I'm not sure what to believe. My eyes or... or logic, I guess.”

“I get that,” Levi said. He shrugged at Eren's curious stare. “First few times witnessing a possession – then an exorcism, and all things in between. It can be hard to stomach. It's an early battle between your physical senses and what you've been trained all your life to believe is real and fake.”

“Guess so,” Eren said with a shrug as he sat up in bed. The sheets pooled around his waist and his tan shoulders prickled with goosebumps. “Look, I -”

“You scared the shit outta me.”

Eren's heart flip-flopped.

Levi stared down at his hands, fisted like rocks on his lap.

“You keep fucking doing that and I have no idea how to – it makes me want to punch your damn pretty boy face and protect you at the same time. That's not normal. I don't even do relationships and I know that's not normal. But fuck if I can ever tell if I want to knock you out or kiss the shit outta you. You scared me today. But it's never just today. You scare me all the time, Eren.”

Eren stared.

Well, that hadn't been what he had been expecting. Not that Eren had prepared himself for anything, but had he done so, it would have been the polar opposite of this left field confession.

“Um.” Eren studied Levi's stern profile, willing him to look up from his lap, albeit fruitlessly.

So, Eren just said the first thing that came from his heart and mind.

“I love you too.”

Levi whipped around, his eyes narrowed.
“What – that's not -”

He visibly struggled for words while his jaw twitched. Even in the dim lighting, Eren could watch Levi's elegant cheekbones darken in a blush as he death-gripped the sheets like a lifeline.

“You don't need to say it,” Eren said, hoping his voice would not tremble and betray the cacophony of his pounding pulse in his ears. “But I am.”

Levi's gaze swept across Eren's face, seemingly searching for something.

“Eren. This is fast. Much too fast.”

“I know,” Eren said breathlessly. “And I love you anyway.”

Why was Eren saying this to Levi now? It wasn't really because of what Levi had said to him. No. It was because Eren knew what was coming. What he would have to do. And he knew the possibility existed that Lilith might win. There was always that chance.

So maybe Eren was saying it because, the way his life was going, he could never know what was riding on the next sunrise.

Levi gave him everything Eren craved, everything he'd missed out on growing up, and everything he never realised he'd needed until now.

Attention and care, stability, a firm hand, sound logic, a deep well of loyalty, and a fighting spirit to match alongside his own. Why shouldn't Eren cherish that while he could?

“You don't love me,” Levi said, staring him down hard, like this was an interrogation. “You don't even know what love is, kid.”

Eren bit down on the flare of fury singing his tongue.

“You believe that, old man?”

Levi's eyes darkened.


Eren repressed a smile.

To most people this would not be a victory. But this was Levi. For his entire life, he'd grown accustomed to fighting for everything. Nothing was free. And here Eren was just giving this to him.

That would be new. Would be scary, even. And maybe a little exciting.

Either way, Levi was not rejecting Eren. He was not punching him or laughing in his face. He was caught off-guard.

And he was considering it.

That was a win in Eren's book. Reaching out, Eren cupped his palm around the cool nape of Levi's neck and gently pulled him in. The soft kiss that lingered at the corner of Levi's frown was simple, yet it's gentleness spoke of more.

“Levi?” Eren said, his mouth drifting to the delicate shell of Levi's ear.
Levi's response was a raspy _hmmm_, as he leaned into Eren's touch.

“We need to talk. We all need to talk.”

Levi stilled. His voice was more sturdy, serious.

“I agree.”

“Okay,” Eren murmured against Levi’s temple. He smelled like a thunderstorm. Eren didn't want to move.

“I already called everyone here,” Levi said.

“You read my mind.”

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“Who the hell would want that.”

Eren muffled a laugh against Levi’s shoulder, inwardly marvelling at his own ability to smile on a day like this. But that was just the power of Levi.

“You're a dick,” Eren said in the same tone in which he'd admitted his love. “Get me some clothes, unless you want Hanji and Erwin to get an eyeful.”

“I'd kill them both,” Levi said under his breath as he got up and headed for the door.

Eren grinned like a fool.

Yeah, that was all the love he needed right now.

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“Does anyone know where the hell my dad is?” Eren asked as he unceremoniously flopped into one of the library's deep-set leather chairs. His legs sprawled out, his back still sharply protesting the impact of the chair against it so many days ago.

Erwin looked up from behind the desk, a cup of tea paused at his lips.

“I believe he's been sent away on assignment. He didn't notify you?”

“I thought you said you knew him,” Eren said flatly. He relaxed an inch, though.

Erwin returned Eren's look evenly and returned to his tea.

Hanji was the next to pipe in. She paced the room, frowning a little as she checked her phone. She spoke without looking up.

“So, what's the news, guys? I'm kinda in the middle of a thing back at the lab.”

“You'll want to hear this,” Eren said, sitting up now and straightening his spine. He looked to Levi and met cool, composed eyes. Eren couldn't help but frown. “Levi believes I had another experience with Lilith today.”

“And you don't believe it?” Hanji said, quick to catch on to their mute disagreement.

Eren sighed.
“It doesn’t really matter. Either way, I think the one thing we can all agree on was that the exorcism was a failure.”

Eren looked to Erwin, whose expression was grim.

“Initial exorcisms have failed before,” Erwin said, his mouth thin and eyes distant. “They can be repeated with better success.”

“Like with my mom?” Eren said dryly. That had worked out spectacularly.

Erwin didn’t rise to the jibe. He merely fixed his gaze on Eren and waited.

Eren’s jaw stiffened as he looked around the room. Everyone knew they were waiting on Eren to reveal something – he just didn’t know where to start.

“I think I know how to get rid of her,” Eren said lowly. “But I’m the only one who can do it. You’re all basically useless.”

Eren’s strong suit had never been subtlety.

The room remained gripped in the joint-cracking fist of silence. Eren's attention flicked around the library. Erwin's gaze was narrowed but curious. Hanji's eyebrows were raised, her lips pursed in a round of surprise and intrigue.

And Levi – Levi looked murderous. In the most dead silent, stony faced way, he looked as if he would cut Eren down at the knees on the spot.

Eren chose not to look at Levi as he elaborated.

“Before I had exorcised Bertolt, I had... help,” Eren said, visibly struggling for lack of better word. “From this one spirit who is, I dunno, a friend, I guess. A good friend. He, uh, he gave me his energy – his strength – and that light – it's like a light – is what gave me the power to pull through the thing.”

Eren swallowed the knot in his throat, noticed his white-knuckled grip on the armchair and released his hold. He finished his exposition in a stumbled rush of words.

“The plan is for me to completely absorb this spirit's energy, and with the strength of two, bring the bitch down.”

“What happens to the spirit?” Hanji said, the first to speak. Of course she’d be most interested in the supernatural repercussions.

“He dies,” Eren said tightly, feeling his heart clench. “Again. Basically.”

“Who’s the spirit who would offer themselves up like this?” Erwin asked. “You called it a friend.”


Eren could swear the very air stilled and froze over, like a lake of thin, deadly ice. Everyone was suddenly looking at Levi, and Eren had no idea why. But he did know that he was suddenly terrified to say another word, because Levi's entire face had sapped to bleached bone white and his gaze had sharpened to icicles.

“Armin?” Levi said lowly, folding his arms over his chest, his shoulders stiff.

“That's, uh – yeah, that's... what's going on here?”
“I won't have any part of this,” Levi said crisply, tugging at the hem of his shirt with agitation as he already made his way to the door. “Aside from this being a very obvious shot in the fucking dark with countless unknown factors, I won't be a part of -”

Levi snapped his jaw shut and yanked at the doorknob

Eren shot over, quickly grabbing at Levi's arm to restrain him.

“Levi, what the f-”

“I won't murder him again,” Levi said, his voice hollow and devoid of emotion.

Words went stagnant in Eren's mouth as he dumbly watched Levi tug from his loosened grip and slip from the room.

_Murder._ Levi's voice echoed in Eren's skull as he attempted to scrape together a solid skeleton of the situation. But he could only come up with bare bones.

Finally, Eren turned to gawk at the remaining people in the room.

“What the _fuck_ just happened?” Was all he could manage.

Erwin and Hanji exchanged a look. Hanji nodded and headed for the door.

“I'll check on him.”

Erwin stood, his large hands slipping into his pockets as he rounded the desk to approach Eren.

“Had we known the spirit you've been communicating with on a seemingly regular basis was that of Armin Arlert, we would likely have handled this situation differently. Preferably, without Levi in the room. Or him knowing of the plan entirely.”

“What the hell had he meant by what he said?”

Erwin seemed to take a moment's pause, a quiet breath. He met Eren's eyes with stern gravity. The air felt concrete.

“Armin is Levi's only failed exorcism. He had expired during the process and Levi blames himself. Armin is why Levi abandoned his position in the church. This happened mere months ago. From this incident, I believe we can confidently conclude that Levi is far from at peace with the situation.”

Eren was silent. He didn't know what to say to that. To any of it.

Knowing Levi as he did, Eren was hit with the knowledge of how devastated Levi must be. The way he still mourned the loss of Isabel with such force illustrated just how deeply Levi held on to his past pains and anguish. Armin would no doubt be the same. And so fresh. Levi had to still be working through the trauma – and all alone. The realisation made Eren's stomach turn.

“However,” Erwin said, pulling Eren from his reverie. “I'd like to properly conclude this meeting, even if it's between the two of us.”

“Business always first with you,” Eren said before he could bite off his rudeness.

Erwin's thick eyebrows rose a fraction, but he otherwise did not react.

“Although I have never heard of any instance of what is essentially a self-performed exorcism, I
support the idea. You've experience what is essentially a trial version on previous occasion, and the side effects were minimal.”

Eren breathed a dry laugh.

“I like threw up on myself and went into a miniature coma.”

Erwin actually shrugged, as if that was nothing.

“It's your plan, Eren. Yours and Armin's. And you've made it very clear for some time now that you distrust my abilities.” Before Eren could pretend to disagree, Erwin nodded briefly to him and made his way to the door. “So if that's how it is, perhaps you should finally prove you're better.”

With that, he was gone, and Eren was left with only his thoughts for company.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Hello, faithful readers! Thank you for sticking with me this far! And if you're new - welcome to our own personal hell!

I have to apologize for two things:
1. The length of this chapter. It's short because the next chapter is the epic showdown between Eren and Lilith. So yeah, that's a thing. Then a scant few chapters til the ending.
2. My spelling. Since moving back to the US from the UK, I'm using US spelling once more. One day I'll probably go through and alter my spellings, but today is not that day. So bear with me.

Otherwise, please enjoy! Comments are lifeblood, and feel free to drop me a line at atomicblonde.tumblr.com!

Eren searched the house from top to bottom, until he discovered the lone shadow standing on the wrap-around porch at the back of the house. Night had long fallen, and the soft haze of cool mist and drizzle continued to film the air.

Despite the dropping temperature, Levi had discarded his jacket and stood with hands tucked into his pockets, the sleeves of his pressed shirt rolled to his elbows. His shoulders were stiff, his face bathed in darkness, unreadable.

Eren approached him with the only peace offering he could muster around this house. He gently nudged a warm mug of soothing, aromatic Earl Grey tea against Levi's arm.

"Here. Don't get a cold."

Levi didn't look over, but he did accept the cup, and that was better than nothing.

They stood side by side for some time, watching the rain. Listening to the distance whoosh of cars skimming through puddles. A dog barking. Faded laughter from within the house.

"You're really not going to help me?" Eren finally said. He turned and drilled Levi with a look.

Levi's huff of breath was soft through his nose. He sipped his tea with a calm that Eren knew was entirely manufactured.

"Seriously?" Eren said, once more.

"Go to bed," Levi said dismally, giving nothing away.

Eren bit off a heated fuck you and swallowed down his ire. Discipline had never been his forte – but dealing with Levi, plus his own new skills, were all cultivating at least a grain of restraint.

"Levi," Eren said carefully. "Armin is already dead. He's gone."
“Say his name again and you'll lose some teeth, kid,” Levi said, and took another small drink of his tea. “I only warn once.”

“He's dead Eren.”

Eren's bruised back slammed against a wooden porch pillar before the mug could shatter across the floorboards and scatter like white bone casualties. The breath punched from his lungs as he exhaled sharply, Levi's hands fisting his the collar of his shirt with a strength his stature should not be able to exude. Levi's face pressed mere inches from Eren's, his pale skin ghostly in the moonlight and shadow, his eyes shining silver slits.

“You don't think I know? I was there, Eren. I was fucking there. I did it to him. I pushed him too far. I lost him. And now you want to push him further. Do it all over again. Hasn't he suffered enough? Haven't you? Are you both so fucking childish to think that this plan could work? Because I'm gonna have to burst your bubble and tell you there's no way in heaven or hell you and some weak-ass ghost are gonna be able to exorcise a demon on your own.”

“So help me, dammit!”

Eren shoved at Levi with his full strength and sent him sprawling back a few distancing steps.

“What the hell good are you?” Eren snapped, his breathing coming in hot and heavy huffs. “You won't be an exorcist anymore. You won't help when the people you care about are in need. You're just gonna stand in the fucking dark and torture yourself over what has been instead of changing what's to come?”

When Levi didn't reply, Eren dragged his hands through his hair and ran them down his face in exhaustion. His voice quieted.

“You're not an eighty year-old man, Levi. You've got your whole stupid life ahead of you to be a mopey bastard, but now sure as hell isn't the time for that. Stop being so fucking scared and just help me. Help Armin.”

Looking to their feet, Eren finally registered the shattered mug. He squatted down, his gaze cast low as he began to carefully collect the pieces and lay them gently in his palm.

“You do this with me and he will move on. He won't haunt this house. He won't haunt you. His chapter will be closed. Yours will be too. Don't you want that?” Eren looked up and realized Levi had dropped down across from him to collect the shards, too.

Levi peered up, almost hesitantly, and met Eren's eyes.

Eren cocked his head.

“Haven't you suffered enough?”

Somehow, Levi never needed to reply, because Eren already knew he was the type of man who never felt it was enough.

Levi scowled then, and lowered his gaze once more to finish his collection of the mug.

“You sure talk a lot of shit like you know something about life.”

“I think I know enough,” Eren said, bristling.
“All kids think that.”

Before Eren could retaliate with something other than colorful curses, Levi stood up with a quiet sigh. He cracked his neck in one direction, then the other, rolled his shoulders and turned towards the house.

“Let me think,” was all he said before he disappeared inside.

Eren grimaced, stamping down on impatience and annoyance, but waited outside until he’d cooled sufficiently. Eventually, he made his way back inside, disposed of the remaining mug in the kitchen, and found himself standing in front of Levi’s door, unsure of what to do.

They had fought. Kind of. Pretty much.

Did that mean Eren couldn’t come in? Or were they okay? Were they supposed to stay mad at each other or could they disagree and still sleep in the same bed? Eren didn’t want to sleep alone, upstairs, with only the ghosts and Lilith for company.

He wanted Levi.

Did Levi want him?

And just like that, the door opened a few inches and Levi was staring up at him through the gap, his expression droll and unimpressed as it ever was.

“You coming in or you gonna stand there all damn night?”

Warmth burst against Eren's chest and flowed through his limbs, like a hot water bottle. His lips parted, but there wasn’t much he wanted to say but, I love you.

So, instead he pressed a palm against the door until it fully swung open, leaving Levi exposed.

With his expression intensely and purposefully devouring Levi, Eren hunched over, cupped Levi’s jaw with one hand, and claimed that cool, frowning mouth in a slow, sober, searching kiss.

After a brief moment's hesitation, Levi surrendered in the parting of lips, tilting his chin and sinking into the silent, spinning moment.

Eren locked the door behind them.

They undressed each other slowly that night, learning the other's angles and contours, dips and curves and tastes anew. Levi was subdued, kissing Eren's ears and cheeks and throat as he thrust into him with slow, sure strokes that soothed and maddened in equal measures.

The room was too black to make out anything much the outline of Levi above him, the mere essence his presence, his spirit. Eren lost count of how many times he reached up to cup Levi's face in his palms and guided him in to meet his lips.

He could swear he felt Levi unfurl his energy and cradle Eren in it, soothing rain and ocean colors, lapping at his sensitive skin and cleansing the fear that had begun to clot in his heart over the past weeks. Levi was a healing force. With everything in Eren, he knew that. He just wished Levi knew it too.

Hours later, with the patter of cool rain in his ears and the warm weight of Levi collapsed asleep atop Eren's splayed body, Eren allowed himself to sleep.
Tomorrow would be bigger than him.

***

For once, Eren woke before Levi. It had been a difficult evening for both of them.

Unfortunately, Eren hadn’t slept well at all. Nerves, paired with the constant fear that he may dream of Lilith kept him on the frustrating precipice of sleep much of the night. So, it was with the dreary grey-stained dawn that Eren rose.

Clad in plaid pajama pants and one of Levi’s band t-shirts, Eren wandered into the kitchen and found himself staring at Mikasa at the stove with a very tall stack of pancakes.

“Um,” Eren said, clever as ever.

Mikasa whipped around, her dark eyes widening a little in immediate surprise, but quickly warming as she surveyed Eren’s rumpled state.

“You look like shit.”

She didn’t look any better. Her too-long bangs were pinned back, the back of her hair mussed like a black nest from bedhead. She wore an oversized sweater that nearly reached her knees and old, holey leggings.

“Thanks,” Eren said with a self-deprecating curve of lips.

He wasn’t exactly sure where he stood with Mikasa since their last interaction, but she didn’t look angry anymore, at least.

“You’re up early,” Mikasa said, turning back to her cooking to flip some pancakes.

“Can’t sleep. You?”

“Same. I’d stayed at Jean’s the last few nights, but – I dunno…” Mikasa’s head bowed, but Eren couldn’t see her expression. “Jean something that made a lot of things clear for me and I realized that however much I need you, you kinda need me more right now.”

She looked over her shoulder and smiled softly.

“So, here I am.”

Eren blinked, his face heating.


“Why would I?” Mikasa said with a laugh, returning to the food.

Eren just grinned and made his way to the coffee maker, where there was already a steaming pot waiting. He poured himself a cup in amiable silence and took a seat at the island.

Looking into his steaming mug, he pursed his lips in thought.

“So, I’m gonna be doing something potentially dangerous, and I want you with me for support.”

“I don’t like the sound of this already,” Mikasa said, her shoulders tensing. “Talk.”
“I think we've all figured Lilith isn't gone. And she's too smart for Erwin. She can trick any of them, really, because they can't be inside my mind. The only people she can't trick are me – because she's in my head – and... and you, because you could touch me and know.”

Mikasa wordlessly flipped the last of her pancakes onto the high stack and switched off the stove. Grabbing one of the pancakes from the plate, she ripped a chunk off and popped it into mouth. She nodded a little, chewing thoughtfully.

“Well, you're not wrong. Probably. What then?”

“I mean, I basically wanna do a self exorcism. With my skills and stuff, I'm the best option we have out of everyone here.”

“Confident with yourself, aren't you cowboy?” Mikasa said dryly, her eyes stormy as she now aggressively tore at her pancake and stared Eren down.

Eren shrugged and took a sip of coffee.

“It's just true. I need me the most to get through this. But I need everyone else too. To keep each other safe.”

“Well, you can count me in,” came a voice from the doorway.

They both turned to look at Annie, who was already dressed in her soccer practice attire. She probably had an early meet before school started.

“Hell no,” Eren and Mikasa said in tandem.

“You're already susceptible to that shit,” Eren said quickly, causing Annie to snap her mouth shut on her rebuttal. “Who knows if she'll jump from me to you. I won't risk that, not on your life. Literally.”

“Ditto,” Mikasa said, folding her arms with a no-nonsense look.

Annie mirrored Mikasa's stance with narrowed eyes.

“I have too many parents in this fucking house. Gimme some pancakes.”

The tension bubbled away as much as it could with that comment, and the three of them gathered around the island to eat early morning pancakes and drink coffee and orange juice. Eren filled them in fully on his plans with Armin, and truthfully said he didn't know where to start, but he would figure it out.

“So,” Annie said as Mikasa cleared the plates. “When's this all going down?”


Annie gaped and Mikasa nearly dropped the dishes.

“Today?” Mikasa said with a hiss, fumbling to get everything in the sink. “Christ.”

“Yeah, I could use some of his help too,” Eren said wryly.

“But you don't know what the hell you're doing,” Annie said.

“I -”
“I'm helping.”

Everyone stopped to look at Levi. He was already showered and dressed smartly in dark grey slacks, a crisp white button up, and deep maroon v-neck sweater. He looked like he'd walked out of a magazine. So much so that Eren had to shake off his wonder in order to properly react.

Eren's face burst into a bright smile as he met Levi's sulking expression.

“Yeah, Levi's helping. So, basically, we're gonna kick demon ass.”

“No shit,” Levi said, leaning in the doorway, surveying everyone in that chilling fashion he had. “It happens tonight, kids. Hold on to your souls.”
Head bowed, Eren watched Levi’s pale, steady hands tightly bind his wrists to the sturdy oak chair. Levi was crouched between Eren’s knees, a single wrinkle in his brow, his lips tight as he tied Eren even tighter. Eren swallowed the lump in his throat and eked out a smirk, waiting for Levi’s stern gaze to rise.

“Not exactly how I planned to get you to tie me up, but I’ll take it.”

Levi’s stare remained unwavering as he stood, his palms using Eren’s knees for leverage to heft himself up. Before Eren could open his mouth again, Levi leaned in, eyes still open, gaze still holding, and grasped Eren’s chin in hand.

His mouth swooped in and took Eren’s own in a hard, bruising kiss. The moment was brief, yet still battered at Eren with the stormy seas of Levi’s barely dammed emotions. The strain, the anger, the fear.

Then, gone.

Levi was spinning on his heel, showing his back to Eren before there could be more. His was all straight shoulders and quick movements as he moved to the basement desk and flipped sharply through the Bible.

Eren blinked sluggishly, surveying the room.

Mikasa had her arms wrapped around herself, her hair pulled back from her face, she eyes downcast and expression deep in thought. Jean stood beside her, staring agape at Levi as if the entire scene had been akin to watching a woman give birth. Father Erwin stood apart, a towering visage in black, his collar a white gash across his throat. He looked upon Eren without expression, mute in both spirit and countenance. Hanji stood beside him, arms folded, rocking from side to side in obvious impatience.

And there was Armin.

Eren couldn’t see him, but he knew Armin stood just behind him. Silent, waiting for his true end to take him.

Dread was a deep well plunging through Eren’s core. The silence was a deafening pressure muffling his ears. He didn’t want to drown in the depths of Lilith’s bloody hell. He didn’t want to lose these
people. He didn’t want to lose *himself*, now that he’d finally started to grow into the man he could be.

So he wouldn’t.

He would not relent. He had a gift no one else had here. He had supernaturally talented friends that no one else had. Eren had a life. Tragedy had brought him here, but triumph had allowed him to remain.

The atmosphere cracked and spat in the build-up of tension. Like an old vinyl record pricked with the needle, just before the music breaks through the room. The fizzle hung in the air.

“Let’s start the music,” Eren said, mostly to himself.

Meeting Levi’s eyes one final time, Eren closed his own.

Levi began his rhythmic mantra in a low, even voice, calling upon saints and blessings with which Eren had little experience or understanding. In time, he would learn.

After this. After he learned from *this*.

“Yes, Lord our God, be merciful to us, Your image, and save your servant Eren Jaeger from every threat or harm from the evil one, and protect him by raising him above all evil.”

Levi’s words caused something to squirm in Eren’s belly. Worms bunched and slid, as if feeding upon a rotting corpse.

Lilith would fight him, of course. Would take this opportunity to try and devour him, suck up the blood and marrow within in him, become him. She was awake and stretching her limbs now. Countless slithering limbs throughout his core.

“In the Name of Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, strengthened by the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God, of Blessed Michael the Archangel, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul and all the Saints, we confidently undertake to repulse the attacks and deceits of the devil.”

Eren’s heart pinched, quick and sharp. He gasped loudly and bit down on panic. Furrowing his brow and squeezing his eyes tight enough to see stars, Eren began his search.

Dark, darker.

“As smoke is driven away, so are they driven; as wax melts before the fire, so the wicked perish at the presence of God.”

Black to deep, muddy, bleeding red filled his vision. Searching felt like slogging through putrid muck. Copper filled Eren’s mouth, heavy and thick across his tongue.

“May thy mercy, Lord, descend upon us.”

Eren swallowed hard against the sickly churning in his gut. He needed to concentrate. Find her, yank at her, hurt her. Whatever it was he had done in previous exorcisms – but more. So much more.

There was so much to come.

“We drive you from us, whoever you may be, unclean spirits, all satanic powers, all infernal invaders, all wicked legions, assemblies and sects…”
Levi’s voice gave Eren a layer of strength. His armor against this evil.

Eren sloshed heavy steps through what emerged as a swamp of entrails. Intestines, organs, vile sloppy innards sopped around his knees, and grew up towards his thighs.

“God the Father commands you. God the Son commands you. God the -”

The gore was warm, Eren thought, feeling faint, dizzy. Warm like a mother’s womb. Could be comforting, almost welcoming if he just… laid down, sank in. Left himself to be cradled by Mother.

Distantly, Eren recognized Levi’s prayers. But it was okay if he was a little far from home, wasn’t it?

“Oh my darling,” cooed a tender voice that sent a shiver down Eren’s spine. “Sweet baby boy. Why are you in such a horrid place? Why are you making yourself so very tired? You should sleep. Rest. Beside me, with me. Just as I did for the first nine months, I will keep you inside of me. You could live within me, Eren. You’d never have to miss me again. Nor I you.”

Eren’s face crumpled. Hot tears flowed in burning steals down his cheeks, a map of his pain.

He did not sob, but simply wept in silence. He barely took note of the rank, decaying viscera inching up his thighs.

“Mama?” Eren said.

Had he spoken out loud or in his head? Was there a difference? He could no longer remember.

Couldn’t recall why he was here in the first place.

Only this prenatal warmth remained, languidly encompassing. And his mother’s voice, filling him.

“I’m here, darling. I’ve never left. I’ll never leave.”

And then she was there, in the blink of an eye. Standing in the muck with him, smiling an indulgent smile, white dress stained with blood. Her smooth skin seemed to hum with energy, prickling the hairs on Eren’s arms. Her gaze held an ethereal glow, unwaveringly clinging to him. Her smile showed off sharp, pointed teeth, glimmering white.

“Take my hand,” she said, her voice slithering beneath Eren’s skin, burrowing into his heart.

EREN.

Eren blinked at the distant echo of his name.

Mother twitched and cracked her neck to the side. The swampy innards and gore were soaking up her ghostly dress, had crept up to cleave at both of their bellies.

Eren felt sick, confused.

But Mother was right. He did want to sleep.

Eren swallowed hot, vomitus saliva and held out his hand.

EREN – NO!

Squinting at Mother, Eren hesitated in taking her hand.
“Who is that?” he asked hollowly, feeling distant from his body.

“Take my hand,” Mother said, her fingers straining outwards like a spiders web. Her glowing eyes were unnaturally wide and urgent. “Take it.”

**EREN, LISTEN TO ME. EREN, I CAN’T FIND YOU. I CAN’T FEEL YOUR MEMORIES, YOUR FEELINGS ANYMORE. IT’S ONLY HER. IT’S ONLY –**

“Take my hand, Eren!”

**- LILITH! THAT’S LILITH, EREN!**

Mikasa’s voice rang in Eren’s skull like a shrill alarm.

“Mikasa?” Eren said with a frown. He looked around in a daze, blinking as if emerging from the dark.

Burning, deep red vitriol had risen to his chest. His arms were slick with blood and excrement. Exhaustion leached through his skin, made his head and stomach spin with hot, greasy nausea.

Eren swallowed the bile that threatened to rise up in his throat.

“**Take my hand, Eren!**”

Mother was bellowing now, a voice that expanded the darkness tenfold as she grew in height. She loomed over him with a long, spindly hand still outstretched.

“You are weak,” Mother said as her beautiful features twisted and stretched over her elongating skull. “You are tired. You are nothing to anyone but me, and you’ve always known it. Your father didn’t care, nor your friends, or lovers, or the rest of humanity.

Eren gagged on his own vomit and swallowed it down.

“N…no…” he eked out.

**EREN, PLEASE FIGHT HER! WE LOVE YOU. ALL OF US. YOU’RE OUR FAMILY. YOU’RE MY FAMILY.**

“Face the truth, Eren Jaeger,” Mother said acidly, her voice icing through Eren’s veins. “The moment that I died, you have been utterly alone in this world.”

Tears flowed once more in hot abandon, as Eren peered down and found entrails and blood bubbling up towards his throat.

Eren closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Centered in on his breaking heart.

Yes, it was true. It was true.

“I can’t reach you,” Eren said quietly, sounding dead already. “I can’t move.”

**NO, EREN. NO!**

“Oh, my useless child,” Mother crooned.

And then she was closer, with the swamp draining to their ankles. Blood and pus drenched clothes, intestines tangled around their feet.
Mother was beautiful again, the same height as Eren, her smile filled with bright hunger and piranha teeth.

She opened her arms to him. Unlocked herself like a door to walk through.

**EREN! EREN!**

Eren could see the dark, sickly smudge where her heart would crouch. Watched her defenses yawn like a huge cavern, preparing to shelter him for life.

“When ARMIIIN!” Eren screamed with every scrap of will and energy and desperation.

Without waiting for confirmation, Eren lunged his hand forward and punched straight through Lilith’s chest.

Lilith shriek was unholy, her hair flaming red and her eyes blacking out like a void.

But power ignited in Eren with a spark, a beacon. Armin filled his darkened core with hope, and light, and love.

Together, they were the love of everyone in that room, of God and his saints and protectors.

Eren grabbed Lilith by the hair, tangled it in his fist, and yanked her close. Nose to nose, even as she struggled and hissed and spat blood in his eyes.

Eren thrust his hand past her cracked ribcage and took a hold of her burning-cold heart. His fingertips froze on contact, like touching dry ice, but it was nothing.

She was nothing.

“You are alone,” Eren said, his voice an unexpected overlap of his own and Armin’s soft, youthful one. They spoke in tandem as they squeezed her heart with every strength within them.

Lilith’s eyes widened and she choked, blood crying from her tear ducts.

“It was once me,” Eren said, his words like nails in Lilith’s soul. “And now it’s you. It’ll forever be you, Lilith. Leave me, demon!”

The key hung around Eren’s neck. It always had. Never far. He released Lilith’s hair and ripped the key off of its chain with the freed hand, feeling himself swell with the remainder of Armin’s strength.

Lilith’s skin broke out in pus-filled popping boils, her flesh melting off in burnt-meat stinking globs that slapped to the ground upon their feet. Muscle and bone, and seeping sulfuric, noxious blood, Lilith fell into him with her talons scouring for Eren’s throat.

Face hard as stone, his mouth in a sneer, Eren tore Lilith’s heart in one turn of the wrist and a sickening tear of muscle.

Lilith released a death scream that had blood filling Eren’s ears and trickling down his neck. The floor began to crumble beneath their feet.

Lilith’s scream-gaped silent mouth and hollow corpse plunged down into the nothingness.

Eren and Armin followed in the fall. Eren’s stomach leapt into his mouth, a shout unable to escape. In one hand he clutches the key, and in the other, Lilith’s heart.
If this was the last thing Eren ever did – if he fell for eternity with Lilith’s corpse and never managed to claw back to his body – this needed to be it.

Wishing he knew a good prayer, but having faith that Levi and Erwin were still doing it for him, Eren thrust the key deep into the rotten heart of Lilith the Demon Mother.

The clump of muscle and blood set alight, flamed, and crumbled to ash in his palm.

One final shriek filled the abyss.

Eren felt empty.

Armin was gone. Spent. Dead.

And Eren was still falling into the depths of his body.

His sarcophagus and final resting place.

“Levi,” Eren said, his voice cracked and strained, barely audible.

“Levi,” Eren said again, swallowing hard against tears. “I just wanted you to know that Armin is gone. Safe. Forever. So don’t worry anymore, okay?”

Eren allowed himself to finally close his eyes.

And so he fell, an ash-encrusted key clutched in his hand forever.

***

“Eren, you can’t keep falling,” a pleasant voice said, sounding almost amused.

“Sure can,” Eren slurred.

His body was depleted. More importantly, his mind and soul were failing.

Lilith had taken so much from him. More than he or the group had ever anticipated. He was simply hollow, and Lilith’s toxic aura still clung to him like smoke from a housefire.

Eren had been burnt down to his foundations.

There wasn’t much left to him. Sticks and stones and broken bones.

Eren laughed feebly to himself.

“You’re dying,” the voice said again.

Despite their message, the tone was like a cool, calm waterfall against his scorching skin.

“Isn’t this worse?”

“I don’t mean here. Your body, Eren. Your body is dying.”

Eren hummed a noise of distant agreement.

“Are you going to waste the gift I gave you?” said the voice, quiet and patient.

“And wha’s that?”
Eren fingered and flipped the crusty, charred key between his aching fingers.

“Your life.”

Eren stopped falling.

His vision remained blind in the depths of his own entrapment, but his feet touched the ground.

His knees buckled and he collapsed.

“My… life?” Eren said, rolling the words around on his parched tongue.

“Eren…”

Soft palms cradled his cheeks like he was precious porcelain. Eren flinched back upon contact, but found himself easing in anyway, starved for touch.

“Eren… Come now.”

Satin-smooth hands slid from his face, to his shoulders, and around his back. Arms, slim and strong, encompassed him in a sweetly fragrant embrace that eased his aches like a balm.

Numb, Eren rested his head on a bosom of cloud-like tranquility. He breathed deep and inhaled the scent of spring rain and rebirth.

“Eren,” she said now, though Eren could not find it in his heart or strength to put a name to the voice. “You’ve never been alone. You must know.”

Eren choked on a heart-wrenching sob, gritted his teeth together against the cry, and buried his face deeper against her chest.


“I can’t stay here, my love,” she said in a kind murmur. Her slim fingers caressed the back of his head, carded through his hair like when he’d been a boy. “And neither can you.”

“I don’t want to leave you!” Eren’s voice broke down in another pathetic sob.

He fist ed her clothes in his hands, memorizing the way he was so much bigger in physical frame than her. But her hands felt the same. She smelled the same. Her heart beat brightly beneath his ear the same.

“Oh, now,” she said, that humor returning to her voice. Eren had long forgotten its light-hearted lilt. “Don’t you know you never have? I’m never gone. My strong boy. You’ve grown into such a good man. I don’t want you to be here. Neither do you.”

“Now –” she continued, before Eren could protest. “Get on your feet.”

She pulled him up on his weakened legs, and he had no strength to fight it.

Eren blinked into the darkness, and found that it was no long so dark. More like a full moon pregnant and content in the sky, casting its honeyed, silver sheen across the plain.

And she stood before him.

Sweet-faced and serene. Eyes like his, half-smile like his.
“Mama,” Eren said, the barest whisper.

“Take my hands, Eren,” she said kindly.

He took them. Of course, he did.

Christ, she was so much shorter than him. Yet, he could sense she was vastly more powerful.

“You need to wake up now.”

Eren’s chest tightened in panic.

“But –”

“I love you, Eren. You will always be my world. And this world? It’s now yours, too. Don’t abuse it. Don’t take it for granted. And never ignore or forget it. Do you understand?”

Eren’s heart sank, heavy and hard. His attention never strayed from his mother’s face, outlined in stars and moonlight.

“Yeah… I love you.” His voice hitched. “I love you, Mom, and I miss you so fucking much.”

Mom smiled placidly, amusement playing up in her large eyes.

“I know.”

“I –”

“Wake up now, Eren.”

She kissed him on the cheek.

Eren released a long, shaky breath.

“Wake up now.”

***

Eren’s eyes hurt like a bitch.

Gingerly, he creaked them open to peer around the room. Cheap lighting assaulted him along with the cloying aroma of too many flowers piled up in all corners.

Stark walls. Beeping machines. Hospital room.

Of course. It had to have been bad. Whatever had happened to him on this side of everything.

“Ugh.

Eren winced as his throat protested at even that mild use of his voice.

Face scrunched in full body discomfort, Eren stubbornly egged himself on until he’d sat up in bed. He hissed in pain when he used a hand for balance. Snatching it up against his chest, he realized his hand and wrist were in a cast.

Same hand that had ripped Lilith’s heart from her chest.
Shit. What had happened to him while he’d been up against her?

“Eren?”

Eren jolted and looked to the doorway, but Mikasa was already launching herself onto the bed and wrapping her arms around him. Her cheek pressed warmly against his, and she did not startle away at the contact.


“Something like that,” he said with a croak, patting her back lightly. “Unless you’re gonna keep crushing me.”

“Dick,” Mikasa said with a watery laugh and dark, glistening eyes as she carefully left the bed. Her face glowed with pleasure as she simply beamed at him wordlessly. For Mikasa, that was actually kind of creepy.

“Um…” Eren searched for what to ask first. “How long have I been gone? Out, I mean.”

Mikasa’s expression immediately sobered.

“Four days.” She took a deep breath and pulled an ugly, olive-green chair up to the bed and sat. She looked down at her hands.

“We didn’t know what happened. Or the level of damage. You’ve been breathing on your own, so that’s been good. Just completely unresponsive.

“But we haven’t really known if we’d won or not. Or where you had gone. I was – once you started speaking as Lilith, or Lilith pretending to be your mother, I guess, I sat at your feet. Put my hands over yours.

“Eren, I could feel you disappearing. Your sadness was there, your loneliness, and sense of failure. And your belief in her, Eren. I felt it. You believed her.”

“Hey,” Eren snapped. “That’s what she does. She makes you believe.”

“So I started screaming at you,” Mikasa said, peering up to watch him. “I didn’t know what else to do. Out loud and in my head – I just yelled. And I tasted blood. So much blood.”

Mikasa inhaled a shaky breath.

“And I felt you dying. She was like –”

“Absorbing me,” Eren said quietly. “I was drowning in there and I thought that if I went, I would be with her. My mom – but not my mom. Lilith. I’d have been with Lilith.”

They both fell silent, remembering.

Eren cleared his dry throat.

“But you were screaming like a psycho,” he said with a small curve of lips. “And it gave me a second. Just long enough to really hear her. Long enough to remember that I needed to get close enough to destroy the bitch.”

“And how… I mean, did you? Do it?”
“I ripped her heart out,” Eren said tonelessly.

That moment had murdered something within him. Eren knew he would never forget what he was capable of, or how it had felt to crush the life out of someone – demon or otherwise.

“Jesus,” Mikasa said with a quiet breath. “That explains, um, your hand. It just – it just crumpled beneath mine. Like someone balling up an old piece of newspaper. Your hand just crunched in on itself. You didn’t even flinch. Didn’t scream. You just said… You are alone… And some other stuff.

“And the whole time, Levi kept reciting his Bible. Erwin kept praying. Jean kept holding on to me in case I passed out. Hanji… She filmed it.

“Like, no one ever stopped. They all believed in you to the end. Even when your skin turned dead and grey. Even when your face fell forward and you went totally limp.

“Only after… Only after you passed on your message to Levi did he…”

Mikasa trailed off. Stared down at her hands again.

Eren’s brow furrowed.

“What about Levi? What did he do?”

Mikasa didn’t say anything for a moment. Then, her voice forcibly brightened as she looked up.

“Hey! Since this all happened I’ve had way better control over my abilities. I can even touch people normally. Not that I go around –”

“Mikasa,” Eren said tightly. His heart raced, its quickening rate reflected in the harried beeping of the machine attached to him. “Where is Levi?”

Mikasa’s face went grave.

“I don’t know.”

“What d’you mean you don’t know?”

“No one knows, Eren. After he knew you were stable here, he literally packed all of his belongings and disappeared. We’re all in the dark. But, I mean, he’s obviously… quit. Quit the house. Us. I don’t think he wants to take care of people like us anymore. Not after…”

“After what?” Eren was shocked he could even speak.

Mikasa reached out and laid a hand on his thigh.

“After you.”
Chapter 35

Eren didn’t feel right coming back to the halfway house. What he needed wasn’t there, anymore.

So, when he left the hospital with nothing more than the clothes on his back and the now-rusted key in a small, padlocked box in his backpack, Eren made his way straight home.

Erwin and Hanji drove him, but mainly in silence. They already heard the stories, the viewpoints, during Eren’s two weeks in the hospital. They also knew that Eren was boiling with hurt and rage at Levi’s disappearance.

Regardless of his emotions, neither person was inclined to tell Eren where Levi had gone.

Well, lucky he’d been growing to know that little asshole inside and out.

The moment Eren was dropped off at his home, he stormed to his room. Of course his father was not there. No surprises here. Eren was finally learning to let go and get over that shit.

Upon entering his room, he couldn’t help but recall the time Levi had wildly fucked him right there.

“Get a fucking grip, Jaeger,” he said to himself gruffly. He rummaged through his belongings, packed a small bag, and was out of the house again within fifteen minutes.

Rounding the house, he went to the tiny, one-car garage and yanked it open.

For the first time since he’d awoken over ten days ago, he grinned.

His dad never used this fucking Harley Davidson anyway.

Upon his approach, Eren pulled out his cellphone and shot a text to a fairly recent friend.

Address? I’m visiting. Today.

Eren mounted the bike, kicked the engine to life, and left his home behind.

He’d faced down a demon. He’d survived. He wasn’t scared of Levi.

Only, he was. He really, truly was.

Because what was more terrifying that facing off with the person you love and point blank asking them why they left you?

Hospitalization had left Eren plenty of time to think. About Lilith, about Mom. About Levi.

In the twisted, repressed world of Levi, what could be enough to make him leave? What was Levi afraid of? And why leave now, when Eren needed him most?

And maybe Eren had been too eager to assume Levi loved him. That was becoming a pretty distinct possibility.

The drive was cold, wet and miserable. Autumn was here, full frontal and soggy as hell.

Eren made only one stop at the state line rest stop for a caffeine and sugar-laden soda, and to just stand in some place that was warm and toasty for ten minutes.
He continued on, refusing to question his resolve. When had he ever? If he was going to do A Thing, he was going to fucking do it. Whatever Levi said to him...

Well, whatever was said to him, Eren would make sure he was heard, too. Everything he wanted to say, from beginning to end.

He was positive that Hanji and Erwin had been feeding Levi updates on his health. Eren knew Levi wouldn’t go without that. It wouldn’t have mattered if it was him or some stranger, Levi did care about those under the distress of the supernatural. So he fucking knew what Eren went through – to some extent, anyway – and he fucking knew Eren was home, safe and sound.

And yet nothing.

Little shitbag.

Eren held on to the anger, the outrage. Because he couldn’t dwell on the hurt. He’d had enough waterworks recently to last a lifetime.

By the time he reached the road which circled the now-familiar lakeside, Eren was soaked to the bone and night had fallen fast. But he bit down on chattering of his teeth and refused to regret this trip.

He knew where Levi would be. He just hoped…

Eren wasn’t sure.

Fuck, he just needed to see Levi’s face. From the moment Eren had woken in the hospital bed, it had been all he’d wanted.

Eren passed Krista’s home, saw that the lights were all warm and glowing in every window. He considered stopping in, since he did say he was visiting today. Instead, he pulled quietly into Levi’s driveway, sent a text to Krista that he was fine for the night, and stood in the rain, staring at the cabin before him.

He couldn’t make out any lights at the front of the house. But the kitchen and main living area were towards the back. And, well, Levi’s sports car was in the fucking driveway.

This was the closest they’d been in so long. So much time wasted. And why? Eren had to know.

Stealing his strength, Eren jutted his chin out stubbornly, marched up to the door, and knocked – hard.

The was no porch light, and so Eren remained in the dark, pouring rain running rivulets down his zipped up, too-thin jacket. His jeans clung to his thighs, his pony-tailed hair like a wet, limp rag.

This was definitely not his best moment.

Unfortunately, the realization only struck him when Levi yanked open the door with a faintly hassled look prepared for whomever had knocked.

“What do you –”

Levi looked up, stopped. His lips remained parted, utterly cut off mid-sentence, his mouth just locked open in obvious surprise.
This was the closet Eren had ever really seen him to shock.

Under the circumstances, it kind of annoyed him.

Rain dripped in Eren’s eyes, clung to his eyelashes as he frowned deeply.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t come?”

Levi didn’t appear to even hear him. He just stood there, his hand white-knuckled on the doorknob, his pale eyes wide, his pupils thick as he scanned Eren from head to toe, his almost hungry gaze rampant across Eren’s face, as if looking for any trace of injury.

Eren’s heart softened. Just a little. The worry was clear as day to Eren. Maybe no one else would see it, but he did.

That only made Levi’s abandonment worse! Why? Eren needed answers, now

“Levi, could I co-”

Wordlessly, Levi lunged for him. Walked straight into the rain-sodden porch in black socks, and launching his arms around Eren’s neck, clinging tightly. Eren couldn’t make a sound before Levi had locked his lips to Eren’s, tongue swooping in, searching, tasting Eren like a man starved.

Levi’s breath was hot and humid against Eren’s clammy, still-cold lips, and Eren could do nothing but moan and open for him. Wrapping around Levi, Eren grabbed grabbed his tight ass and unceremoniously hefted him up in his arms.

Fiercely strong hands fisted in Eren’s sopping hair, yanked his mouth closer, crushing his body further into him. His desperation was seared into Eren’s skin, warming him quickly from the inside out. Eren moaned and simply held on, unable to even walk them into the house.

Torrential rain beat down them both as Levi remained anchored to him, holding fast with his urgent, eager mouth while his hands, his palms, and fingers ran a course over Eren’s cheeks, jaw, neck, shoulders. Tracing, remembering, treasuring – Eren didn’t know what. Just that Levi had never wanted him more and Eren couldn’t say no.

Thunder roared and rolled through the raging night sky. Eren’s breath caught in his throat, as Levi trailed a line of hot, fervent kisses down the side of his neck, biting, licking and tasting as he travelled. A thick fog began to blanket Eren’s coherent thought, and it was the last action he could think through to bring them both through the front door and kick it closed behind them.

And then, it seemed, there was no more room for thought.

Eren thumped Levi’s back against the wall. Levi grunted against Eren’s mouth and tore himself away onto the wrench his now-damp shirt over his head and away. Once more, Levi was devouring Eren whole, his quick, nimble fingers slipping on Eren’s jean zip, but managing all the same to yank it down impatiently.

Still wearing his soaked jacket, shoes, and every other article of clothing, Levi bit down on Eren’s earlobe and expertly slipped Eren’s dick from his pants. That soft, hot hand wrapping around him was like dream and an unbearable nightmare all in one, because Eren could barely take it from the start.

His breathing came hard and fast, short gasps and strangled, cut-off moans escaping his mouth as Levi’s rain-slick hand pumping Eren’s straining cock to delirious levels of ecstasy.
Eren felt his knees go weak, didn’t know if he could hold them both like this for long before he collapsed. He spun, leaned against the wall himself for reprieve. But nothing could stop the thunderous slamming of his heart against his ribcage, or the lightning shock between them as Eren’s pleasure-drunk, half-closed eyes met Levi’s razor-sharp, insatiable stare.

Then Levi was sliding out of Eren’s arms and – and on his knees, Jesus fucking Christ.

Levi took Eren’s heavy, leaking cock into his mouth like Eren was the most delicious meal of his lifetime. Eren could only cry out in shock, his wide open eyes going blind as he tipped his head back and knocked it against the wall. His hands bunched in Levi’s silky, wet hair, and droplets sprayed errantly on the hot, flushed skin of his erection. He could have sworn he heard them sizzle upon contact.

When Levi took him deeper, Levi’s own choked moan lapped lavish vibrations along his length, and sent Eren straight to heaven.

_Fuck_, he wasn’t going to last long. Not with _this_ – and _Levi_ – and _them_ doing this and –

Levi’s tongue was ecstasy. Clever, awful ecstasy. His lips were swollen and red, stretched tight around Eren’s dick as he worked him over with slick, wet sounds and increasing urgency.

“_Levi_,” Eren managed to choke out, shocked at the sandpaper rasp in his own voice. “_Fuck_, I’m gonna… I’m gonna —”

Levi moaned obscenely loud around Eren’s dick and sucked him down as far as his mouth could take.

Eren burst with a force that knocked the wind out of him, his thighs shaking with the force of it, his spine igniting with trails of sparks, his mind catapulting to bright white nothingness. Levi’s mouth remained fast around him, clinging firmly as he drank every drop, only slowly removing his mouth when Eren slid bonelessly down the wall.

Not even caring this his dick was still out of his pants, Eren sat on the floor and leaned forward, propping his forehead heavily on Levi’s shoulder with a shaky sigh.

There was no telling how long they sat there, both catching their breath.

Eren actually dozed a little, so relaxed was he from this treatment, and so exhausted from his three hour drive.

He’d missed this.

Levi’s clean, fresh scent. The feel of his skin, His hard, muscular body in the tight compact package.

However, Eren could also practically hear Levi thinking.

Levi’s breath had slowed to normalcy. And although it seemed he would not push Eren away, Levi was not actively touching him on any level, minus the casual brush of their knees, and the placement of Eren’s brow.

Eren swallowed, his throat suddenly tight, as he tried to think of what to say. How to say it.

“You smell like wet dog,” Levi said, his voice as cool as a goddamned cucumber.

“Gee, thanks,” Eren said dryly, still unmoving.

He stood then, making no eye contact with Eren. His back was already to him as he made his way to the kitchen.

“And put your dick away, for fuck’s sake. This isn’t a brothel,” Levi called from the next room.

Eren scowled, but did as he was told. The fucking nerve. He should storm in there and demand answers immediately.

But damn if he didn’t want a warm shower and dry clothes.

So, he did. And maybe he used Levi’s soap. Whatever.

He walked into the bedroom, skin rosy red and warm from the scorching shower, and found clothes already laid out on the bed. Not Levi’s clothes, of course. Too small. Looked like maybe Erwin’s. Cozy, green and navy flannel pajama pants and a slim, black t-shirt fit surprisingly well.

Eren dressed, glared in the mirror at the damp, ruffled hair in his eyes and blew it out of his face. He needed to cut it all off.

He padded towards the kitchen, recognizing smells of spaghetti and garlic bread.

“I need food,” he said as he entered the room, scratching an itch on his stomach.

Levi didn’t look over his shoulder, and his shoulders were surprisingly relaxed.

“I figured. It’s just the jarred shit.”

“I’ll take any and all,” Eren said greedily and as sidled up beside Levi. The entire moment felt so natural that he bumped Levi’s hip with his own without a second though.

Levi went stiff has a pulled bow, and although his gaze was lowered to the stove where he scooped spaghetti and sauce into his own bowl, Eren could see his lips go thin and his cheeks paling.

Eren aimed a narrow look at the top of Levi’s head and said nothing, giving no reaction that he noticed Levi’s change in countenance.

Silently, Eren took his own meal and followed Levi to living room. Levi sat on a large, comfortable chair that nearly swallowed his stature in its deep cushions. Eren chose the couch, seating himself directly across.

First and foremost, Eren dug into the spaghetti. Since the exorcism, he had found himself outrageous famished at every meal, as if his body were still healing, deep inside. He basically inhaled his plate, only making eye contact on the occasion he looked up to rip into his garlic bread.

Levi barely ate. His expression remained barricaded.

“When was the last time you ate?” Levi asked, looking annoyed.

Eren shrugged as he finished chewing his last bite of bread.

“Like, this morning. Before I got discharged.”

Levi made a kind of noise of understanding, his eyes downcast as he set his plate aside on the coffee table. Eren followed suit and did the same.
With his jaw already set tight and stubborn, Eren leaned back into the couch, folding his arms across his chest. His eyes narrowed as he met Levi’s level gaze.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Eren asked quietly.

“Sitting,” Levi said dryly, crossing one leg over the other.

“Fuck off,” Eren said with minimum heat. “What are you doing here when I’ve been over there all this time?”

Levi inclined his chin in that obnoxiously regal way he had.

“For now, I’m living here. Until I find a new job, a new place that suits me.”

“A new place,” Eren repeated slowly, as if the words didn’t fit. “You’re leaving the halfway house.”

“I’d always planned on it anyway,” Levi said casually, looking down and picking a bit of lint off his jeans. “It was only a matter of time.”

Eren felt his face go hot with checked fury.

“And the time was now, of all times?”

At this, Levi looked up sharply and met Eren’s gaze, head-on.

“Now is –” Levi paused and licked his lips, and Eren noticed they were still chapped from what they’d done only an hour ago in the next room. “Now is the right time.”

“Now is – now?”

“Yes.”

“Now is the right time.” Eren’s voice cracked, his anger spilling out enough for him to jump to his feet. “Now is the right time? What the fuck is wrong with you, Levi? I almost died! Like, I felt myself dying! I –”

“You don’t think I know, you idiot?” Levi said with a hiss, standing to his own full height. The scowl on his face enough to make anyone feel small. “I was there. I was standing in front of you the entire fucking time! Reading my useless fucking words from my useless fucking Bible like I could do any good in that situation. When you were out there risking your ass with no good plan whatsoever!”

“Hey, I’d consider I did a good fucking job since I happen to be standing here,” Eren said, his voice raising a decibel.

“You were gone, Eren!” Levi’s voice went hoarse with emotion that even he could not bind. “You don’t know what it was like for any of us. You live in your own little world where you just bounce the fuck back up and get ready to take the next hit like the last one didn’t hurt you. But it did! And we saw it – I saw it! I saw you cry for your fucking mommy. I saw your bones break. I saw you spit blood.”

Levi was livid, his face a previously unseen color of red, words shooting from his mouth like bullets that burned Eren to the quick.

“I saw the life leave you, Eren. So don’t you tell me you did a good fucking job when you were in there alone like some goddamned shitty hero! Which you’re not! You’re a kid, Eren. You’re just a
dumb kid.”

Levi released a shaking breath, looked down at his trembling hands in obvious disgusted, and shoved them into his pockets. He looked up, his expression stormy and raw, and hurting Eren’s heart.

“You’re just a stupid kid, and I can’t have anything to do with you anymore. For my own sake.”

Levi didn’t seem to have the heart to look at Eren anymore. He turned on his heel and moved to exit the room.

“Sleep anywhere you want,” he muttered. “Just make sure you leave tomorrow. See ya, kid.”

Eren stood there, alone, mouth agape. His eyes threatened angry, heartbroken tears that he refused to shed. One rolled down his cheek, but went ignored.

No. No no no.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. This wasn’t how it would go. It wasn’t over. Eren couldn’t let it be over. He didn’t even get to say the things he’d wanted. And wasn’t that why he’d come? To see Levi. To tell what needed to be told.

Eren felt suddenly weaker. Weak as when he’d first awoken, also alone there.

He sat down, staring numbly at the chair across the way.

An hour must have passed, at least. A broken heart would do that to you. Slow time, splinter it up so you could take each shard and shove it into your chest for good measure.

But Eren just sat there, gazing at nothing.

He’d heard Levi rummaging in his bedroom. Soft footsteps, then the bed creak as he got in for the night.

Would Levi sleep soundly now that he’d rid himself of who plagued him?

No, Eren couldn’t imagine he would.

Well, he had nothing left to lose, did he? He certainly didn’t. Everything and everyone was gone.

And so he moved to his feet, slow as an old man, and made his way quietly to Levi’s door. Eren paused, pressing his ear to the wood, listening. There was, of course, nothing.

Eren took a deep breath and tried for knob. At least it wasn’t locked.

Here goes nothing, he thought.

He opened the door slowly and took a step in.

“You just don’t let shit lie, do you?” Levi’s weary voice said in the dark.

“Yeah,” Eren said feebly. He came to the edge of the bed, looked at the strong lines of Levi’s bare back facing him, his tattoos shifting in the shadows.

Holding his breath, Eren slid into bed. Staying on top of the blankets, he rolled to his side, facing Levi, who was rolled facing away.
“I came here to say shit to you, y’know.”

“You’ve always been full of shit to say and plenty of it.”

“Bite me,” Eren snapped, then clamped down on his anger. He sucked in a breath and released a sigh.

He tried again.

“There’s some things I had wanted to tell you. That you wouldn’t have heard or known from anyone else but me.”

When Levi didn’t answer, Eren continued. He never closed his eyes. Just watched Levi breathe.

“You know I wasn’t alone. I may not have known exactly what I was going to do, but I wasn’t alone. I could hear you the entire time, you know? Maybe not at the end, when I was in too deep. But a lot of the time. You were there, you were with me. I thought of you as, uh, as my, like… armor, I guess. Do you know what I mean?”

Again, there was nothing.

“And Mikasa… She snapped me out of that. That seduction I was under. And Armin saved us all. I couldn’t have done it without him. And I miss him.”

Eren chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“But I wasn’t alone. You can’t play me off like a stupid kid, ‘cause I’m not. Hell, I’m not even a kid. Maybe to your old ass, but –”

“Eren.”

Eren bit his tongue.

“And then I met my mother.”

Levi stopped breathing.

“What?” he said quietly.

“I haven’t told anyone,” Eren said. “Not anyone, Levi. But when I woke up, you were the first and only fucking person I wanted to tell and you weren’t there.”

“Eren, I –”

“I’d been ready to die when she caught me. I was on my fuckin’ way, y’know?” For the first time since he’d come out of the coma, Eren let his throat thicken with tears. “I wanted to die, Levi, because I knew I wasn’t strong enough to live anymore. But sh-she caught me when I was falling, and she pulled me up on my own to fucking feet, and she said I didn’t belong there.”

Eren sniffled wetly and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. He rolled on his back to stare at the ceiling. He could hear the patter of rain on the roof.

“And y’know what I thought? Even though I didn’t want her to be right, because I wanted to stay with her – I knew I didn’t belong. I already had a place where I belonged.” Eren swallowed hard, and his voice was clear when he spoke again. “With you, Levi. With you, you hardheaded asshole.”
“Hey,” Levi said, rolling over suddenly to aim a sharp glare through the shadows. In turn, Eren shifted to face him. Levi narrowed his eyes. “I –”

“I love you, Levi.”

Levi’s entire expression went still. He’d heard it before, yes. But this was different. Eren was different now.

“And I needed to tell you. Not for you, because you’re as stubborn as they come, but for me. Because it’s true. I do love you.”

Levi seemed set in stone, unable to move or blink or look away from Eren’s eyes in dark.

“Do you understand yet, Levi? I came back from the dead for you.”

Levi released a hushed, shuddering breath.

“Eren, I… I don’t – I can’t be with you.”

Eren felt the stab in his heart and accepted that. He was growing accustomed to accepting pain, and he wondered if this was part of becoming a fully jaded adult.


“Because I can’t watch you do what you did the night,” Levi said, equally quiet. Like it was a secret, even from himself. “Because I know what you want to do with your life, Eren. Your exorcisms without religion. Saving people, hunting things. Hurting yourself in process. Every time. I –” Levi sounded almost panicked, pushed in a corner neurotic. “I can’t see that again. I can’t. I won’t. I won’t be there for you in that. Never again.”

Levi closed his eyes.

Eren’s heart swelled.

“You love me,” Eren said tenderly, his lips curving.

“That’s what you got from all that?” Levi snapped, but he sounded tired, and when he opened his eyes, there was no guard there.

Their eyes having adjusted to the darkness, they gazed at each other for quite some time. Neither touching, neither moving. Just listening to each other’s breaths and observing.

“I want you by my side,” Eren said quietly. He grinned. “I’m not above kidnapping.”

“You couldn’t kidnap me if you tried, buddy.”

“I’d throw you over my shoulder and that would be that.”

“I’d snap your neck and that would be that.”

“Mean.”

“That’s me, alright.”

Eren’s smile faded after a moment. He met Levi’s eyes in earnest.
“Seriously. Don’t you think I’d be a million times safer with you at my side, helping me?”

“Don’t you think I’d be a million times grayer from trauma if I was at your side?”

“You live for it.”

“I don’t,” Levi said flatly.

“You’d rather I go at this alone?”

“I’d rather you not go at this at all.”

Eren sighed.

“Can’t do that. I’ve got a gift and I need to use it. What kind of coward would I be, otherwise?”

To that, Levi didn’t reply.

Eren reached out for the first time. Brushed the back of his hand across Levi’s forehead.

“Let’s make a deal.”

“That doesn’t sound promising.”

“You work with me. You’re basically my body guard. And when I get in too deep – when you see that it’s too much for just me, or I look really sick or upset or lost or whatever – you tell me to stop. You tell me to stop, and I stop.”

Levi narrowed his eyes.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Okay, okay, so maybe I’ll argue with you from time to time –”

Levi actually laughed, short and quick and handsome.

“I mean, this is us we are talking about. But I will listen to your side. And I won’t be stupid. Because if you weren’t there, I would be. I will be.”

Eren paused, traced his thumb across those stern, thin brows.

“Because I’d have nothing left to lose,” he said gently.

Levi gripped Eren’s wrist firmly in his hand, stilling any movement.

Still without reply, Levi shifted their positions with a roll, until Eren was on his back and Levi straddled his stomach. His face unreadable, Levi silently ran his fingers through Eren’s disheveled hair, pushing it back and out of his face. He looked so troubled, so deep in thought that it was adorable. And Eren knew he’d get in a knee in the balls if he said so.

See, he was riding the learning curve.


Eren ran his hands up Levi’s thick thighs, still distracted by his earlier thoughts.
“Yeah?”

“I do love you.”

Eren froze. His entire body blushed hot and pink from head to toe.

“Wh-what?”

He had not been expecting that. Not really.

But there was no saying it again. Not for someone like Levi. He simply leaned in and pressed his lips softly to Eren’s.

A sigh broke from Eren’s lips, and Levi licked it up without rush.

Riding high on Levi’s words echoing in his heart, Eren cupped his hand around the back of Levi’s neck and brought him close. Kissed him deep, and thorough, and hot and long. It wasn’t until they were both gasping that he allowed their mouths to part.

Fuck, Eren was already hard and, evidently, so was Levi, by the way he was rhythmically grinding down on Eren’s stomach.

“Lemme see you,” Eren said, his voice thick with lust, with love. He stared up hungrily, adoringly at Levi and his swollen mouth and foggy eyes. “Lemme see you right here.”

Levi murmured in agreement, leaning in to brush his lips across Eren’s ear. Sparks flew across Eren’s skin.

“I need you naked, first,” Levi said, his voice gone low.

They obliged each other willingly, hands trailing each other’s limbs as they stripped each other of barriers. Errant kisses whispered across shoulder, collarbone, and chest. Eren felt he might just float up and hit the ceiling. His body hummed with easy waves of pleasure as they rolled languidly across the mattress, shifting and moving against each other until it was too much to wait.

Levi straddled Eren once more, hot eyes roaming Eren’s face as Levi coated his fingers in slickness, arched up onto his knees, and opened himself in preparation for Eren.

Eren couldn’t move, couldn’t close his gaping mouth or quiet his heavy breathing. He took in every inch of Levi, the muscle lean body, eyes closed in self-pleasure, his erection so deliciously close, lube glinting and dripping down his inner thighs.

Biting down on his bottom lip and meeting Eren’s eyes, Levi rested his hands on Eren’s chest for balance and brought his hips down with aching slowness. Eren didn’t bother to hide his unmistakably desperate gasps as Levi filled himself, inch by inch. He just kept his hands tight on Levi’s thighs and guided him with painful patience.

Levi tipped his head back, the column of his throat so starkly white and appetizing, as he seated himself fully onto Eren’s cock.


“You’re mine,” Levi said darkly, now raking his gaze over Eren’s face and body as he slowly began to roll his hips.

“Yeah,” Eren said breathlessly. He hissed with the staggering tightness encompassing him.
“Say it,” Levi said quietly, completely stern despite the flush in his cheeks and across his chest. He
continued the agonizingly slow bob of his hips. His thighs seemed to quiver with the effort to remain
unhurried. “Say it or I’ll never go any faster and I’ll have you crying by the end.”

Eren gaped. Swallowed hard and gasped, then gaped again.


Eren bucked his hips up, obviously taking Levi by surprise as he cried out and bowed forward,
dropping his brow upon Eren’s own.

Levi began to move his hips in earnest, the rhythmic slick slap of their skin meeting sending Eren to
the edge. He thrust his hips upward, harder, faster. With enough force to nearly lift Levi’s entire
body off the bed and plunge in deep.

The air filled hot and humid with their mingled moans and gasps of breath as they found a rhythm.

When Levi was beginning to mindlessly writhe on Eren’s dick, Eren sat up without warning, holding
on to Levi the entire time until Levi was on his knees, sitting on Eren’s lap. Their eyes met and Levi
wasted no time riding Eren’s cock like there was nothing else in the world.

Eren’s fingertips dug into Levi’s hips, bruising, holding, forcing him up and down with loud, hurried
slaps. Levi’s own erection was so full it dripped down his length and slopped between them, Levi’s
dick rubbing and slipping between both of their stomachs.

All that remained was the sound of their breathing, their bodies joining, their hearts beating in their
ears. Levi wrapped his arms around Eren’s neck, hung on for dear life as Eren mindlessly thrust into
him with movements Levi could no longer keep up with.

“I –” Levi’s voice was wrecked, and it sent Eren into further frenzy.

“I love you,” Levi said breathlessly, and his entire body tightened as he cried out in Eren’s ear.

The sound of Levi’s release, of his words, was too much. Eren couldn’t hold on to what followed as
his body burst with vicious shots of heat through every inch of his body. He whimpered and bit
down on Levi’s sweat-salty shoulder and rode it out while Levi quaked with his own aftershocks.

Eren couldn’t begin to guess how or when they collapsed. Just that Levi was flat out on top of him,
his face buried in the crook of Eren’s neck, and Eren couldn’t feel his limbs for how is body glowed.

Levi snored in his ear.

Eren’s chest shook as he held back a laugh. Well, this was a night of firsts.

Elated, Eren allowed himself to drift off and dream of what their lives together would bring.

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“I still don’t see why we need an office,” Eren said, his voice obnoxious and whiny.

Levi dropped a box of office supplies on the large desk taking up about a third of the waiting room.

“Because,” he said sharply, then attempted to reign himself in lest he beat this loved one over the
head with a chair before ten in the morning. “Most people don’t want to wander into some shitty
apartment or creepy old house and get help from two suspicious gay men for their already
undoubtedly strange and supernatural life.”

Levi huffed a short breath from his nose and eyed Eren’s puppy dog face.

“People find comfort in businesses that actually look like businesses. If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it right.”

“I’ll do you right,” Eren said with a grin that was too pretty for a doofus like him. He’d already swooped in to wrap his arms around Levi’s waist and drag him close.

Levi rolled his eyes as his cheek was smashed against Eren’s chest. It had actually become easier to just let this happen than try and fight him off. It was like trying to battle a large, dumb, golden retriever or something. They just kept licking and pawing at you.

“Your wit kills me every time,” Levi said dryly, pushing away and brushing the creases from his shirt. “Now, how about we –”

Levi turned and found himself prompt pinned against the edge of the desk, Eren’s large hands slapped on the wood, effectively caging him in.

Though his heart skipped a beat, Levi only met Eren’s unnervingly teal gaze and raised a brow.

“Don’t even think about it,” Levi said flatly.

“Yeah, but don’t we need to christen this place?” Eren said, his teeth flashing too white and charming against his summer-tanned skin.

“I don’t even know where this desk has been,” Levi said with distaste dripping from every word.

“I can tell you where it’s gonna be,” Eren said playfully, his voice deepening to a rumble that always had Levi’s stomach jittering. Leaning in, Eren brushed his nose against Levi’s neck – eliciting a delicate shiver – and kissed his ear. “You smell really fucking good.”

Levi’s eyelids fell shut at some point. His chest went tight with anticipation as his heart swelled. How did this kid manage to get him every damn time?

Mindlessly, Levi’s hands moved of their own accord, sliding along Eren’s belt and creeping beneath his t-shirt to grip at his hips. Eren hummed a low little noise of approval and arched his hips forward, lightly bumping again Levi’s body.

“Levi,” Eren murmured against Levi’s ear.

Shit, it was so easy to fall into him. Always had been, even when it had been the worst idea of his lifetime.

“Eren,” Levi said quietly, his mouth caressing Eren’s warm neck. “I need you to –”

An abrupt knock on the front door sent both of them guiltily flying to opposite ends of the room.

Levi, as always, was the first to recover. He cleared his throat and smoothed his hair as he approached the door.

Who even knew about this place, yet?

Levi found himself opening the office up to Erwin, of all people.
He frowned. And stared. Maybe it was Eren’s doing, but he wasn’t particularly sure what to say under this circumstance.

“Why do you –”


Erwin aimed a bland look at Eren and didn’t react. Instead, he turned to Levi, his eyebrows lowering in this strange pleading way he sometimes had.

“Levi, I’d like you to consider this your first job. I will pay, of course.”

“I’m hesitant to ask,” Levi said carefully, surveying the fat, moon-faced baby Erwin held in one warm. She looked at him with large blue eyes and smiled a gummy grin.

How did babies get so fucking fat when they barely ate solid food?

“I need you to watch her. She belongs to someone I’m helping. Her mother is currently incapacitated and I need someone I can trust with this.”

Levi took a step back from the creature when it squealed something nonsensical.

“I have literally never held a baby in my entire life, Erwin. You know this.”

“We’ll take her!” Eren said with sickening enthusiasm. Where did it all come from? They needed to bottle and sell that shit. That was business.

Before Levi could literally shut the door in Erwin’s face, Eren was snatching up the baby and slinging it onto his hip like an expert.

“Look, honey,” Eren said to Levi, knowing full well those pet nicknames made him want to blow a hole in his own head. “We’ve got a baby.”

Levi looked on in mute horror.

Erwin stifled a laugh.

“And a happy one you three shall be.”

Levi watched as the fat baby sneezed and promptly snotted all over herself and Eren’s arm.

Eren smiled sheepishly at Levi.

Levi groaned.

“You’re so fucking lucky I love you, Jaeger.”

Eren’s smile bloomed into something that Levi would never get used to.

“Yeah. I am.”

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