Woven Strings

by tainted_ashes

Summary

Levi is a widower and an executive chief of Smith Advertising. Eren is a rising escort doing whatever means are necessary to provide for his family. Neither realize one brief encounter is all it took and their fates were woven together like string.

Notes

Be gentle on me. This is my first Levi/Eren story. :)

See the end of the work for more notes.
His day was almost over. Almost.

Levi sat at his desk in his office. His chin was resting against either of his closed fists as he looked down at the quarterly campaign for the companies current project. Erwin had thrown him a hell of bone for a project. The current account they were trying to advertise was for a line of newly invented vitamins, and while it sounded so dull, the amount of brain power it took to make it seem appealing was ridiculous and most of all fucking draining.

He had been working under Erwin Smith for nearly ten years now. The older man seemed to think he had a knack for over-seeing the rest of the companies ideas and pitches for the campaigns they took and presented. It paid well, it ensured his future, and it was a hell of a lot better than he had been doing ten plus years ago. It also kept Levi busy. Erwin wasn't too much of a pain in the ass. Aside from the ridiculous set of fucking eyebrows he had and his all too ready to go attitude, he wasn't a complete asshole. The two of them had known each other since before college so Levi took a bit of comfort in knowing he wasn't working for some dumbass who couldn't manage a business, let alone a company. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, the man had a vision and did whatever was possible to achieve it.

Dark eyes looked toward his left, downcasting and seeing a neatly stacked pile of papers. He still had other advertising pitches he needed to look over before they were presented to Erwin. Levi sighed and closed the current folder in front of him and began typing away at the computer in front of him. A knock on the door, of course, interrupted him.

Levi looked up and moved his head a bit to see Hange, who was in charge of brand research and development, practically prancing their way into his office.

Goddammit.

"Oh, Levi! I'm so glad I caught you before you headed home!" God, their voice made his eyes twitch. They made their way over to Levi's desk and leaned forward onto it. A hand moved to straighten the glasses falling on against their nose. "Mike wanted me to come by and get the rest of the final touches on the RE Supplement campaign, pretty pu-lease?"
"Jesus Christ, here. Stop bouncing your hyper ass around my office. I've had enough shit for one day. Take it and go," he snapped and without sparing another glance, went back to his computer.

"Sweetheart, don't be like that! How long has it been since we've really had a chance to sit down and catch up?"

Levi made a sort of 'tch' noise before answering, "Not long enough. I've had enough people crawling up my ass today. Get the fuck out of my office."

Surprisingly, this made Hange laugh. Head thrown back and snorting with laughter while taking the paperwork off of Levi's desk. "You're such a stick in the mud. I'll let it slide this time but---"

"Four eyes, I'm not going to tell you again."

"Right-o!" They said while turning their back and leaving. Hange had stopped briefly at the doorway and cocked their head to the side. "By the way, Erwin said he wants you to stop by his office before you go."

Levi groaned at this. Lowly and to himself, but still he did. Fucking hell, why couldn't the day just end he could just go home and get a damn drink---

"Of fucking course he does," Levi muttered more to himself than anybody. Hanje was already out of his office by the time he uttered it. He stood from his swiveling chair and powered down his computer.

Within the next twenty minutes, Levi was heading up three more floors on the elevator until he had hit the 20th. The entire building was beginning to darken from the lack of sunlight, and the fluorescent lights above only seemed to add to Levi's already growing headache. He stood in front of Erwin's door for a few moments before sighing and pushing it open.

Erwin Smith, as Levi recalled, was only a few years older than him. Mid-thirties. Levi was pretty shy of that himself, but a lot of people couldn't really guess his age. The past three years had probably made him age more than he would have liked or realized. His polished shoes clicked against the tile as he made his way inside the office. Blue eyes shot up and blond eyebrows arched briefly before his expression of surprise was replaced with a smile.
"Levi," Erwin greeted. "I'm glad you could spare a moment. Please, sit down."

Levi was already annoyed. He sighed and plopped down on one of the two chairs in front of Erwin's desk. "There had better be a good reason you dragged me up here," he began.

Erwin chuckled deeply. "Pleasant as always," he commented almost dryly. "But there is a reason I wanted to speak to you."

"Let me guess... Do I need to fire somebody? Kick somebody's ass? Which is it?"

"Neither, we're here to discuss you."

Levi stiffened visibly, and he mentally cursed the shit out of himself for it. He sat in silence for a few moments before Erwin continued.

"Levi," he began. "You're a tenacious worker. Diligent, brilliant... you always have been. Over the past few months's I've noticed you're more short-fused than usual. I'm not the only who has seen that. I can understand if the stress of taking on too much is---"

"Cut the shit," Levi interrupted with a snarl. He was too damn tired for this. "My work speaks for itself no matter how shitty my attitude and you know it."

"Your work is flawless, yes. But your relations with our clients and employees is what I'm mostly referring to." Erwin explained while folding his hands in front of him on his desk. His attire practically screamed CEO. A tan suit with a white button-down beneath. "I understand that it can be stressful at times and I also know it's coming up on the third anniversary since---"

Levi stood up abruptly. "You'd better stop right there and shut your fucking mouth," he started. "That has nothing to do with my work ethic, and we both know it."

Erwin was quiet as if he was contemplating what to say next. After a few moments of Levi glaring daggers at him, he sighed. "We both know, as I've said, your work is impeccable. Your social standing leaves much to be desired. Which is why I'm putting you on paid leave for two weeks."
Levi was stunned for a moment before gritting his teeth. "You've got to be shitting me, eyebrows! We both know without me here the entire team is going to be fucking mindless and we the entire campaign I've been busting my ass for is going to---"

"It's been taken care of, and it's already fallen through. We are working now for the commercial as we speak," Erwin replied calmly. "Well, Hange is. That's why I made sure she got to your office before you left. You're working yourself into the ground. You're going through a lot. I'm not doing this to demean you or place you beneath anybody else. We both know nobody can do this job the way you do. You have a remarkable eye for talent. I'm simply telling you to take some time for yourself."

And that was it.

Levi didn't bother saying another word as he stormed out of Erwin's office, down the elevator and made his way into the city streets. The New York air was brittle and cold, and the raven-haired man did his best to adjust his leather jacket as he made his way to the parking garage across the street and got into his car. Levi drove home the entire way cursing and screaming at himself. Fuck Hange. Fuck Erwin. Fuck them all. How dare they assume he needed more time to process and think---This was nobody's fucking business but his own, dammit.

When Levi arrived at his apartment, it was dark and cold. He flicked the lights on and, with care, placed his shoes on the mat by the door. He dropped his keys in the holder on the side table by the living room wall and shrugged his jacket off to hang up. He stood for a few moments before making his way to the island counter by the kitchen and ripped open a bottle of brandy. He poured himself a glass and threw his head back in favor of drinking it down. His muscles were tight, and he might felt constricted and fuck he was so damn pissed off---

Levi's dull blue eyes wandered onto the mantle above his fireplace, and the picture of Petra was the first thing that had caught his eye. Still holding the glass of brandy, he walked over and examined the picture. A bright smile reflected off the glass with her fall colored hair and golden eyes looking back at him. It had been almost three years since Petra had passed away in her sleep. An autopsy later revealed it was a blood vessel bursting in her brain. They had been married for almost six years. Levi never considered himself much of a husband, let alone much of anything in any relationship. He did care about Petra though and wanted her happy. She was one of the few that could honestly have made him smile.

It wasn't something that was typically brought up in conversation. Levi had distanced himself from her family after so long. He couldn't handle hearing other people crying and grieving when he, himself, was trying to do the same thing. So he pushed forward. But he had never actually moved forward. His hand was gripping the glass in his hand to where it hurt.
His days were consistently the same. Work, home, alcohol, and bed. He stared at Petra's picture a few moments longer before he sighed and turned her picture away to pour himself another glass of brandy. He had no idea what he was supposed to do the keep himself from going insane in the next two weeks. He wasn't sure if drinking this much alcohol was a healthy start though.

"Hange, this is a terrible and I mean terrible idea," Moblit explained from the couch as he jabbed his fork into his takeout carton. "You really don't need me to repeat that, right?"

Hange was giggling. Giggling. That was always a scary sign. "Would you hush already? I'm not doing this for any other reason than good faith."

Hange heard a snort. A snort, dammit. "Whatever you say."

Directing their attention away from the man sitting on the couch of their small home, Hange continued to browse the web. "I know exactly what Levi needs. It's been sooo long since Petra passed away," this was said with a sad sigh. Hange had truly loved Petra. She was sincerely dedicated and sweet. How she ended up with somebody like Levi was beyond her. Hange knew deep down though that beneath that hard exterior, Levi was a pretty incredible man. He had many flaws but who the hell didn't these days?

"What're you getting at?" Moblit asked as he ate the rest of his meal and kept his eyes glued to the television.

Hange's eyes brightened when something caught their eye on the laptop. "Well, my dear, what I'm getting at is Levi needs to get laid."

The sound of a brief choking could be heard. "You can't be serious!"

*Long Lasting Memories Escort Service. $300 per hour usual rate. Selection of 30 females and 24 men. Ages ranging from 19 to 40. Book your favorite for an event or your entertainment today!*

Hange didn't even hesitate, clicking away.
"I'm deadly serious," Hange said with the utmost sincerity as they reached for the cell phone on their lap. After tapping away a few numbers, the phone was brought up to their ear. "Hello, yes, I was interested in hiring one of your escorts for a friend in dire need of company."

Deep and dark emerald eyes looked down briefly when he felt his phone vibrating against his jeans pocket. Very much distracted to continue focusing on what was going on around him, Eren pulled out his smartphone and was glancing down discreetly at it while unlocking his password. An email icon caught his eye, and he looked up during dinner to make sure nobody was paying too close attention to him. He swiped his thumb and his heartbeat quickened upon reading---

"Eren Yeager, your services have been requested for November 17 at 7:30 pm at address 5618 NW 26th Street. Dress accordingly. Requester name: Levi Ackerman."

And just like that, everything changed.
It took Eren a long time to get to where he was now. To be sitting in a theater reserved for New York's most memorable plays. He had a glass of champagne in his hand and his other was gripping carefully on the edge of his seat. He was dressed in a white button-down shirt with black slacks. On top of his shirt was a black suit jacket and a deep green tie. The tie was specifically requested, however. Emerald eyes glanced to his left as an older woman sat next to him. She was most likely in her upper 40's. She wore a very revealing black dress and ridiculously long high heels. Eren wondered how she didn't fall flat on her face in the lobby.

But he wasn't here to judge the way she was dressed or to even really watch the play called 'Dancing Titans.' He couldn't have cared less. He was only here because this woman, he believed her name was Toni, was willing to pay him 2,000 dollars for his company tonight.

And that was just fine with him.

At the age of 23, he was making more money than his entire group of friends combined. Eren had never even entertained the thought of seeking employment from Escort Services. Ever. But circumstances as always changed everything around him. Eren's family had moved to New York from Germany after his father, Grisha, had found an offer for his medical expertise that he couldn't turn away from. It allowed him and his family to live very comfortably. Eren had only been 15 at the time. When Eren had reached 18 years old, his father had passed away from a car accident that left him hospitalized for nearly a week before he succumbed to his injuries. Eren's mother Carla and his sister Mikasa were all that he had left. They had managed to survive when all three of them began working shortly after the death of Grisha.

Eren had met so many different people when he had come to New York. Armin Arlet was by far the closest thing he'd ever had to a brother. He was timid and maybe a bit on the cautious side but he was absolutely brilliant. Eren had lost count on the number of times he'd had to ask Armin for help on any college essays. The three of them had started going to University together shortly after Eren's father had passed and Eren was thoroughly enjoying his studies. He was attempting to get a BA in Arts for Sculpture and Design. Sculpting happened to be one of his secret delights. It was hard
having to juggle a job that barely paid what he needed and attending campus four days a week but he managed somehow. They were somehow moving forward.

Unfortunately, the pain his family had endured hadn't stopped there. A year after Grisha's passing Mikasa was the first to find Carla had suffered a seizure while Eren wasn't home. She called for an ambulance, and all of them raced to the hospital. After further persisting from Mikasa more testing had been performed on Carla. Eren's world fell apart when the word's 'brain cancer' tumbled out of the doctor's mouth. Glioblastoma multiforme of the frontal lobe. It was at an early stage but it was progressing.

Over the years, his mom had steadily begun declining. Radiation and treatments were not helping her very much and her quality of life was shaky at best. Eren and Mikasa began taking over the townhouse settled in suburbs outside of the city and having Carla do as little as possible. She continued to take medication and had radiation done to prevent the spread. Nurses were on call in the very beginning but Eren didn't like the way they worked around his mother. He had marched right back to the hospital with Mikasa and began going over a treatment plan they could manage at home.

And that is what set him on the current path he was on now. A year ago, Armin had excitedly told him that hospital around most major cities was going to begin a trial treatment to nearly stop the progression of the tumor from spreading. Doctors couldn't begin to tell them just how long his mother may have had, but he was determined to make sure she could live as comfortably and as long as possible. If it stopped her pain and allowed her to live the life she deserved, he'd do anything.

But the cost was outrageous, and their insurance didn't even come close to covering 10% of its price.

One of his friends Annie had been the one that helped open Eren's financial door.

One night Eren, Mikasa, and Armin had gone out with a group of close friends for dinner and a few drinks in the city. Their neighbor Hannes, who was a close friend to both of his parents, had been the one to keep an eye on his mother while they went out.

"You kids do nothing but work, go to classes and come home to take care of the house. You need a night to act your age," Hannes had said with a knowing grin when he heard Mikasa begin declining the invite over the phone. "Go, have a good time. I can hold things down here."

He was thankful Hannes was there for his family and especially that night. Eren had walked over to the bar while Mikasa, Armin, Jean, Marco, Connie, and Sasha were sitting at a booth. The restaurant had a relaxing feel to it that allowed Eren to take a breather.
"Hey," a low voice next to him greeted. Eren glanced to his side to see Annie sitting next to him. He had met her while working briefly at a club on the other side of the city. They had worked a few nights of security together.

"Hey there," Eren replied while he reached forward for the drink the bartender placed in front of him. Behind him, he could briefly hear Connie loudly greeting Reiner and Bertolt as they made their way to the booth.

Annie stared at Eren quietly.

"What?"

"You look pretty damn tired," she regarded quietly.

He snorted and took a long sip of his beer. "Understatement. I don't know how I haven't collapsed yet."

They made light conversation while Annie ordered a drink of her own. They didn't realize the amount of time that had passed, and Eren was getting tipsy enough where he would've told his life story to just about anybody. Annie was a quiet woman, almost stoic but he had always felt somewhat comfortable around her. She was a lot like Mikasa... very blunt and right to the point.

"How's your mother?" Annie asked.

"Not good. With the little amount me and Mikasa are making just to get by, we haven't even made a dent in the savings we need for the trial treatment."

Eren's shoulders slumped as if the admission itself made him exhausted and Annie didn't press any further. She was quietly watching one of the large TV's on the wall and kept her beer bottle close to her lips.

By 1 in the morning, everybody was pretty buzzed and tired. They called it a night and Eren received a few slaps on the back and a few hugs as well.
"It was great seeing you guys. We definitely need to do this more often!" Marco stated as he clapped a hand on Eren's shoulder. "It's been too long since we've all gotten together like this. Let's try to do it more often."

Eren smiled back and echoed, "Definitely!"

Jean gave Eren a light punch on the shoulder but didn't say anything else. The two of them hadn't gotten along very well when Eren and Mikasa first attended University but he supposed seeing Mikasa get overly protective and jump to Eren's defense was enough to get Jean off his case. Especially when everybody learned about what the two of them were dealing with at home. It made it hard for anybody to dislike them. Eren would have considered it pity, but he knew his friends were caring. Even Jean for fuck's sake.

When Eren was leaving Annie had stopped him by lightly grabbing his arm. "You have a second?"

The brunette glanced at his sister and Armin briefly before turning back and nodding. "Sure."

Annie had pulled Eren a little off to the side of the building and placed something in his hand. When Eren looked down, he found a business card.

*Escort Service* was the first thing that had caught Eren's eye, and he immediately looked at Annie with an incredulous expression. "This is a joke, right? Please tell me you're pulling a fucking prank on me."

Annie didn't seem phased by Eren's outrage.

"You said you weren't making enough money and the trial period is coming up at the end of the year right? This is a professional establishment, and they pay well. Based on your looks I'd say you'd have a shot at making it work there."

"Do you work there?" Eren hissed in a whisper.

"I... I just... don't they... you know..."

Eren could see Annie's lips twitch but her expression, for the most part, remained the same. "If you're not comfortable with the idea then don't call. I'm giving you another option to help your family. It doesn't make you any less of a person," she leaned in a bit and stared Eren dead in the eyes. "You do what you have to do sometimes."

When Eren got home that night he was awake until almost 6 in the morning staring at the business card. *Long Lasting Memories Escort Service.* The words kept replaying in his head and were burned into his vision. He generally knew what an escort did. He just wasn't sure if he could bring himself to sell his body for money. Was it any different from being a prostitute? He had pulled out his phone and looked through the many different faces of those employed there. Sure enough, he had seen a brief description of Annie in there. He hadn't pegged her for the type to do that sort of thing but the woman was an enigma at best. Perhaps she had her own reasons for doing what she did. As she had said, what she did with her body was only her business and hers alone.

It was only when he heard his mother walking into the kitchen that he had changed his mind. She was placing a hand on her head, and her feet were unsteady. She went to the fridge and pulled out a water bottle before going back to her room. She looked clammy; older than she should have. His heart broke watching his only parent suffer.

Eren had decided the next day to call.

It was on that night that placed him where he was currently. He was walking behind Toni into her apartment and stopped at the entryway. She kicked her heels off and sighed. "Come with me," she said quietly.

So Eren followed.

He walked into a bedroom that was decorated lavishly, and it was dim. Toni was leading him quietly before something caught the corner of his eye.

"You're late."

Eren froze in place, but Toni kept walking. She was casually zipping the back of her dress as she stripped down. "Traffic dear. You know better than to think otherwise on a Saturday night."
A grunt was the only reply Eren heard before a man came into full view. He was handsome but older. He was wearing a simple button up shirt and slacks. His hair was combed back and he was taller than Eren. Eren's breath caught when the man strode over to him and looked directly at his face. His eyes flickered to his lips and his cheeks and then his eyes. "He's a pretty one. This the guy you picked last time?"

"He's the only one I'll ever pick. He's a gentleman, and he's quiet. Not to mention handsome as can be. A bit young but he makes up for it."

Oh God. Eren thought as realization dawned on him.

"Um..." Eren began while clearing his throat. "I'm not sure what you're suggesting but---"

Toni chuckled. "This is my husband, Luke. He's usually always away on business, but he's back in town for the weekend. He's aware of our arrangement and was curious about it," her voice dropped a bit, and hazel eyes gazed at him beneath dark lashes. "I hope that's alright."

Not fucking really. Eren's mind screamed.

Luke stared at him a moment longer before cracking a smile himself. "Does an extra $1,000 sound good to you? I wouldn't want to make you uncomfortable."

Eren felt Luke's hands place themselves on his shoulder as his suit jacket began to slide off. Toni was stripped down at this point and came up from behind Eren and placed her hands on his shoulders as well. Is $1,000 dollars really worth it? He wondered to himself as lips brushed against his cheek. He reminded himself why he was doing this and forced himself to relax. $3,000 in one night. Most people don't make that in a month. Deal with it, Yeager. You're doing this for a good reason. With a sigh, Eren resigned himself and began reciprocating their advances.

Eren had somehow managed to get to his classes that morning before getting home later in the afternoon. He brought a spare outfit with him just to ensure not questions were asked. That evening, Mikasa and his mother were cooking in the kitchen together. It smelled of delicious soy sauce and stir-fry; one of his favorites. He was absolutely exhausted. He just wanted to eat and pass out. He wasn't planning on working tonight. He always insisted at least Sunday's off to spend time with his mother and Mikasa.

Eren walked into the kitchen and immediately was at his mother's side. "Mom, you shouldn't be on
your feet too long. It'll give you headaches," he started while taking the wooden spoon out of her hands.

Carla chuckled quietly. "I might be sick but I haven't lost the function of my brain. I can handle the cooking. You're never home anymore. Between school and working, I think it's fair to cook for my own son." She reached and pinched his cheek with an affectionate gaze. "Really I'm fine. If you want to do something for me then set the table."

Not long after they had all sat down together at the table, Mikasa placed utensils down and leaned forward in her seat. "You didn't come home last night. Where were you?"

*Geez, be more obvious.* Eren smiled and jabbed his fork into a piece of chicken. "I stayed by Jean and Marco to study for my next exam. We have a break coming up, so I wanted to get a head start. I also have a sculpting project due next week, so I'll need to spend some time getting that ready."

Mikasa hummed in reply. "Everything okay at the warehouse? Reiner isn't giving you a hard time, is he?"

*Dammit, Mikasa. Why do you have to ask so many questions in front of Mom? Come on. "Nope. Everything's great. Hours are a little rough but nothing I can't handle."

Eren had been very fortunate that Reiner and Bertolt were close with Annie and therefore knew his situation. After careful planning, Eren had managed to lie about a job he didn't have. The two men worked overnight in a warehouse for a large general store in the area. He couldn't very well tell Mikasa what he was doing for a living and he sure as hell wasn't going to tell his mother. As if on queue, Carla reached over and brushed some of the hair out of Eren's face as he ate.

"I'm proud of you Eren. Both of you, actually. Working and still going to school. I don't think a mother could be more proud of her children." She smiled in a way that made Eren remember why he was fighting so hard for her. For his sister. He had more than half of the money saved for the trial medical procedure and he wasn't stopping now. Mikasa was also working hard. She was a medical receptionist at a pediatric center in the city. Whether Mikasa would ever admit it or not she had a pretty big soft spot for children.

Eren closed his eyes and smiled, and Mikasa looked down with a small smile as well. "Thank you," they had both said quietly.
Dinner was peaceful after that. Their conversation moved to lighter topics. Eren was about to stand up and take everyone's dishes off the table when a vibrating in his back pocket made him freeze in place. He tried his best to casually glance at his smartphone without being too obvious. He still couldn't stop the erratic pace of his pulse or how his fingers felt a bit clammy---

"Eren Yeager, your services have been requested for November 17 at 7:30 pm at address 5618 NW 26th Street. Dress accordingly. Requester name: Levi Ackerman."

Chapter End Notes

A chapter in Eren's point of view. Thank you all for the feedback and as always kudos and comments are love. See ya'll next chapter when Eren and Levi make contact!
Eren had gone to Long Lasting Memories main building to change from his casual attire into something much more pleasing to the eye. He knew if he had tried dressing like this Mikasa would have been on him within a second. He was greeted by a smiling face at the front desk and made his way toward a detached dressing area. It was quiet that evening. More than likely most of their employees were booked for the night.

Looking himself over in the mirror, Eren gave himself a mental nod of approval. He was dressed in a white button-down and black slacks. Instead of a suit jacket, he opted for a suit vest instead with a breast pocket to the left. Eren didn't own too many formal outfits so he'd sometimes snag or borrow some from the agency. He did his best to calm his wild hair, but in the end, it did what it wanted. Nobody had ever seemed to complain before.

Eren pulled out his phone and glanced down at his contact information. It was nearing seven o'clock, and Eren always felt a strange twist of anxiety whenever meeting a new client. He had basic age and information on anybody he usually came in contact with. This company was thorough with checking for possible criminals and scammers. There have been unfortunate instances where escorts were targets of violence and the agency took the safety of their employees very seriously.

Luckily, Eren could defend himself. Aside from a few drunks getting touchy-feely with him, he'd never had a problem. He had considered the option of carrying a gun but ended up going against the idea.

*Levi Ackerman, huh? Age 32... his name sounds pretty familiar. Wonder where I've heard it before.* Eren pondered quietly.

Buttoning up his vest and looking at his reflection one last time, Eren made his way out of the building and toward Mr. Ackerman's address.

The apartment building was massive and most definitely expensive. This area was well known for its wealth so Eren instantly knew this person was loaded. Usually, anybody who hired escort services was. Sometimes it made Eren wonder why they'd bother paying for the company. Running a nervous hand through his hair, he looked over along the building’s directory of names and saw Levi Ackerman was in apartment C4 on the upper level of the building.
Eren entered the elevator and stared at the closing doors. Within the amount of time he was inside he'd carefully changed his expression from worried to coy. He knew how to act, and he did it well. By the time he was in front of the apartment door, he had a carefully crafted look of seduction on his face. He rang to the bell and leaned against the door frame.

The site Eren was greeted to wasn't exactly what he was expecting. The man who had opened the door looked haphazard at best. Dull, blue eyes stared at him with an almost resigned gaze. Eren noted there were very dark circles underneath his eyes. His black hair was a bit messy and Eren could see the undercut along the back of his neck. He wasn't wearing anything other than a pair of dark sweatpants which left little to Eren's imagination. He was built with wiry muscle and it made up for his obvious lack of height.

It didn't make him any less attractive.

The most obvious thing was the bottle in the man's hand. It was mostly empty but Eren could see this man was intoxicated. The room reeked of alcohol.

Eren's thoughts were cut off when a pair of fingers were snapping in front of him. "Oi! You hearing me in there? Who the fuck are you?"

His voice was deep and the brunette noted the slight slurring in his speech. "I... um..." Dammit, now is not the time to get tongue-tied. Say something stupid! No, don't say something stupid!

"Look, if you're selling something, I don't want it. If you're here to offer positively me guidance, I'm more than likely going to hell anyway," he leaned against the door frame in front of Eren. "Now kindly fuck off."

Before the man could slam the door in his face, Eren had recovered his composure and stuck his foot between the door and the wall. "Excuse me!" He pushed the door, open and the man in front of him stumbled a bit. "You're Levi Ackerman, aren't you?"

"So what if I am?" Levi replied while taking a long swig of his drink.

Eren was very confused. "I'm Eren Yeager... does that name ring a bell for you?"

Levi tilted his head and furrowed his brows together in mock thought. "Can't say it does," he replied.
while his eyes racked up and down Eren's form. "So what are you then? A prostitute or something?"

Now Eren was fuming. "I'm an escort you asshole! The escort you hired for the night!"

That exclamation seemed to snap Levi out of his drunken haze. An escort that I hired? What the fuck is this brat smoking, crack? "Kid, I don't know what kind of sick joke you're trying to pull on, me but it's not funny."

"This isn't a joke!" Eren tried his best to control his outbursts, but this was not how he was picturing his night going. "Here, isn't this your contact information?"

Eren thrust his phone into Levi's face. The raven's eyes scanned the device carefully. His expression was becoming more sharper by the second and Eren knew from that expression that tonight was not something Levi had planned. "Yeah, that's my information. Would love to know how the fuck you got it."

"Isn't it obvious? It didn't just appear on its own. Either you made the call for my services or somebody else did. Judging by your response to me being here I'm going to say somebody did this behind your back."

Levi made a 'tch' noise under his breath, and the hand holding the bottle in his hand was squeezing so hard, Eren thought it was going to break the bottle into a million pieces. His head was turned away from him as he looked downright enraged. "You wouldn't happen to know who made this call, would you?"

Eren shook his head. "If you want that information I suggest you call the agency and speak to somebody. I only go where I'm needed and that's that."

He didn't say another word and turned to leave the bewildered and enraged Levi Ackerman at his doorstep. Eren's face was red with embarrassment and anger. This isn't the first time this has happened. Many people think they're doing loved ones or friends a favor by calling for escort services. Most of the time though it comes back and bites you in the ass. Eren had lost his composure and definitely acted unprofessionally, but he didn't give a shit. Levi Ackerman was a rude son of a bitch and Eren was more than happy he didn't have to sleep with him.

Once Eren had made his way outside, the chill of the night caught up with him quickly. He had realized he didn't bring a jacket with him. It wasn't cold enough to warrant a heavy coat but he
definitely felt the cool air carrying goosebumps along his skin. With a resigned sigh, Eren pulled out his phone and quickly dialed the screen. "Armin? You up for going out tonight? I got out of work early," he explained with a roll of his eyes.

"Yeah, sounds good. I'll meet you at the usual spot?"

"Sounds good, see you there." Eren swiped his phone screen and placed it back into his pocket. He called for a cab and made his way back to the agency building and retrieved his other clothes and placed his current wardrobe back. He grabbed his jacket this time and made his way over to their favorite local bar in hopes of forgetting the events of that evening.

Levi was furious.

He made his way through the main lobby of Smith Advertising and walked right past the receptionist. She waved a hand in greeting. "Evening, Mr. Ackerman!"

"Piss off," he muttered and made his way to the elevator. He dressed in haste and ran out of the door as quickly as he could. Calling the Long Lasting Memories escort agency had proven useful after all. Now Levi was on his way to smear some blood on the walls of Hange Zoe's office. He knew they'd still be working this late. It was only a little after 8 and he was on a warpath.

When he made it to Hange's office, they were staring at a computer screen. Their eyes didn't even have time to lift up when Levi grabbed a hold of the keyboard and flung it across the office. "Who the fuck do you think you are you shitty glasses!"

"Good evening sugar plum. What's gotten you so upset tonight?" Hange feigned innocence and it pissed Levi off all the more.

"You know exactly why the fuck I'm so upset. Does the name Eren Yeager ring any bells inside the fucked up head of yours?"

Hange tapped a finger against their chin. "Hm... oh yes! Isn't he just a delicious young man? Oh and those dreamy eyes!"

"Are you that insane you shitty asshole? You sent a fucking escort to my apartment! What's worse, the kid looked fucking traumatized when he realized I wasn't the one that called him! You managed to ruin two people's nights, congratulations you fucker!" Levi actually felt a blood vessel bursting.
He couldn't remember the last time he was this angry.

Hange didn't seem affected. Matter of fact, they stood up and leaned against their desk. "I was only trying to keep your best interests at heart, honey."

Levi's eye twitched. "How in the hell is sending a random man to my apartment in my best interests. God, you really are fucking insane."

Hange bent down a picked up the keyboard from the office floor. They examined it and deemed it useless. "When's the last time you've been intimate, Levi?"

Levi's eyes widened in surprise before narrowing to slits. "None of your fucking business, that's when."

Hange sighed. "It's been almost three years since Petra passed and you haven't made any indication of trying to move on. I just wanted to help a little with that process. An escort is somebody with no strings attached. They're clean and professional. Right up your alley," they'd said while turned back to Levi. "I really was trying to help you know. Take it any way you want."

Levi stalked over to Hange and stood directly in front of them. "When and how I chose to spend my free time is none of your damn business. If you pull any shit like this again so, help me I will paint this office with your blood."

Hange watched Levi storm out of their office and took a seat back at the desk. They leaned forward a bit and placed their chin in folded hands. "Oh Levi, you are some piece of work. But I also know you too well. You're not going to help yourself without somebody giving you an extra push." Hange adjusted her glasses and hid a small smile. "And I am more than willing to give you that extra push."

Chapter End Notes

I'm excited to get the next few chapters out. Thank you all so much for your lovely feedback! Kudos and comments are always welcomed. The next chapter should be out within the week. Cheers ya'll and happy reading!

(Revised 1/5/2019)
It had been a week and a half since his meeting with the young escort and Levi couldn't shake off the feeling of rage that continued to consume him. He wasn't a very social creature by any means, and he knew this. That certainly didn't mean anybody could *fucking intervene* with his personal life. He had the great fortune of not hearing from Hange for the remaining time of his forced paid leave. Loneliness was never an issue for the raven-haired man, and it certainly wasn't going to become an issue now.

Levi walked through the downtown streets with a light dark coat over his shoulders. It was early enough in the morning that he had hoped not too many people would be busying the roads. Much to his surprise that late November morning, the city was just as noisy and crowded as he could have expected.

The man made his way into a hole in the wall coffee shop not too far from his apartment. He secretly found that the off name of the place didn't attract very many customers. It was a sanctuary of sorts when he wasn't trying to get himself piss poor drunk. He went there often for a specific flavor of tea he had come to enjoy, and sometimes coffee did hit a particular spot in his twisted stomach when he was overly stressed. When he entered the shop with a soft bell tinkering behind him, his eyes widened briefly at the crowd of people that had occupied the area.

Many younger individuals were occupying the shop while a few out of towners were enjoying the prices and originality of the flavors of the caffeinated drinks. The peace Levi had come to know, and love did not exist that morning. He inwardly cursed and sighed. *Shit.*

He was generally *not* a good person to be around this morning until he had some sort of caffeine in him.

*I'm already here, may as fucking well.*

Levi made his way toward the front counter where a bouncing young woman with blonde hair was smiling at him expectantly. How *anybody* could be this cheery at seven in the morning was beyond him. His brain didn't seem to function correctly until at least ten.

Although... alcohol didn't help much, he was sure.
Levi placed his order and crossed his arms while leaning against the far wall to wait. His blue eyes scanned the area around him, and his thoughts trailed almost lazily to what had transpired a week and a half ago. He remembered with a bleary detail of a young man with stunning eyes showing up claiming to be an escort he hired. What sort of sick fucking joke was that?

What had really gotten to him was the fire infused response and the blaze in the emerald eyes that couldn't be so quickly forgotten. His voice was still clear as day in Levi's head, and at the moment it only seemed to get louder and louder.

**Wait a fucking second...**

Levi's eyes shifted sharply, and he was met with the sight of a tall young man with tousled chestnut hair and a bright smile. He was holding a to-go cup of coffee in his hands and standing next to four other people — three male and one female who was as striking as the young man was. Levi couldn't seem to stop himself as he continued to stare at the very man he was just thinking of.

**Shit. Maybe if I walk out, he won't see me.**

Levi had moved to turn swiftly and leave, but his eyes seemed to run on their own accord - and just as suddenly, those eyes he had tried to avoid ascended and met his gaze. **Double fucking shit.**

The moment their eyes had met Levi noticed Eren's face and how it suddenly transformed with recognition. Dark eyebrows rose on a soft face and his mouth parted in silent wonder. **Fuck, here I thought he wouldn't recognize me.**

Levi made his way toward the front door of the coffee shop and did his best to avoid the emerald gaze on him. He was nearly through the threshold, and he was about to celebrate his escape when—

"Hey!"

Levi stopped in mid-step. He turned around mechanically and without consent from his own mind. He was facing those brilliant emerald eyes were gazing at him expectantly. "Yeah? Something I can help you with?"
Levi would have laughed at the face Eren had made, tense and a bit of anger rolling off of his shoulders. The younger man continued to hold his gaze without waver. "You're the running up on Smith Advertising, so I know you're not stupid."

Well shit.

"I know you remember me," the brunette concluded.

"Of course I fucking remember you. It's not every day I have a prosti—"

Levi closed his mouth with a click of his teeth when the three other individuals that had come to the coffee shop with Eren appeared jointly to his side. One was a smaller young man... short blonde hair that was cut almost awkwardly. Although he seemed to be frail and centered; his aura practically seethed with intellect and mental prowess.

Levi's blue eyes drifted to another young man with a dark hair that seemed to lighten beneath the layers on top. His eyes seemed cocky and arrogant. It almost reminded Levi of himself. Almost.

The third person is what truly caught Levi's eyes. She was sharp and contrasted compared to the others around her. Her eyes with calculating and they bored right into you. She approached Eren and leaned in to speak to him before her eyes moved to meet Levi's. "Who are you?"

Don't waste a fucking second, do you?

Before Levi could answer, Eren had beat him to it. "He's a friend," he started, and he looked at Levi strangely. "From work," he added.

Levi almost snorted.

The young woman looked as though she wanted to retort, but Eren was quick to place his hands on her shoulders to coax her. "Seriously, it's fine, Mikasa. You guys go ahead. I'll meet Armin and Jean after the ten-thirty class."

Mikasa huffed and reluctantly made her way toward the entrance of the shop. Eren received a few
waves from his friends Armin and Jean before they all poured out into the winter streets and continued their way to campus. Levi heard Eren sigh in relief.

"Um..."

Levi regarded Eren with a hint of amusement behind his gaze. Oh, the young and awkward.

"...Should we sit down?"

Levi didn't answer, but he didn't argue either. He wasn't exactly sure why but maybe he felt a bit sorry for the kid. After all, he was intoxicated out of his mind and practically kicked the poor kid when he was down. The least he could do was sit and listen, perhaps buy him a cup of coffee.

"...Sure, yeah."

So they sat.

They stared at each other; analyzing and with wonder. Levi sat across from him with his arms crossed; perplexed and with little interest. His gaze was deceiving enough. Eren wasn't quite as tense though he appeared uncomfortable. He moved around strangely before pulling out his smartphone and sliding it across the table.

"You were easy to look up after I got your name from the agency — Chief Executive of Smith Advertising. A public figure for both the company and everything outside of it," Eren began. Levi narrowed his eyes.

"I'm so glad you're capable of reading basic news articles," Levi deadpanned.

"You're also a widower. Almost three years now with very minimal dating," Eren added quietly.

Levi growled under his breath. "Better fucking watch it, brat. Don't start spewing bullshit about things you don't understand."
"Publishers from all over the state are writing the same articles about you. Washed up, bitter and a widower. No future in advancing in the company you work for now," Eren continued. There was a determined flare of life inside of his eyes.

*Shitty brat, he's roasting me for what I did to him the other night.*

Levi leaned across the table, eyes narrowing further. "You're asking for an ass whooping, kid. Let me assure you I'll toss you clear across the cafe in less than a millisecond."

The Levi's surprise, Eren's lips broke out into a small grin. A stupid, goofy little grin that suited him just fine. "Okay... maybe I was having a little bit of fun with that," he admitted sheepishly. "Can you blame me? You were an inconsiderate prick the other night."

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's not everyday some random man shows up on my doorstep claiming to be a prostit—"

"—escort—" Eren chimed in a hiss.

"Right, escort. It's not everyday some random man shows up on my doorstep claiming to be an escort. So *fucking* forgive me if I was a bit on the shitty rude side."

A heavy silence fell on them as they continued to glare at each other from across the booth. Levi couldn't quite figure out what Eren was thinking, but a determined light seemed to flash inside of those deep eyes, and Levi knew he was planning something.

"I could help you, you know."

Levi blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You know... help get the media and people inside of the company you work for. I can help you get them off your back so you can work without issues and—"

"Wait a fucking second. What makes you think I'm having trouble with work? Are you a fucking psychic or some shit?" Levi retorted with a question.
Levi's answer was Eren pulling his phone back into his hands and slipping his fingers about for a few seconds. When he stopped moving his hands, he slid the phone toward Levi for a second time that morning. His eyes looked at him with quiet expectation.

Fuck, this kid doesn't fail to surprise me.

Clear as day, headlines for the company were posted on a variety of blogs, websites, and tweets. Levi had known that he held a public image just as much as Erwin Smith himself did. Levi hadn't taken into account just how open he truly was until Eren had moved that smartphone toward him. His life was on display, and he was so fucking furious with the fact. He did not need to be analyzed by naked eyes.

"I can help you."

Levi lifted a single brow at the meaning behind those words. "How exactly are you planning to help me? I don't need help from some fucking random kid. You think the media really grinds my gears? Think again, shit head. I could honestly care less what the public thinks of me."

Eren seemed almost indifferent to his statement as if he had been expecting that response. An employee had approached their table, and in turn, Levi ordered Eren his next hot beverage as planned and they both began to take their leave shortly after. Levi could see disappointment lined along Eren's face and he let out a massive and drowning sigh.

"You don't have to get me——" Eren began.

"Look, I'm sorry for fucking traumatizing you the other night. It was a shock, and we both know that now. Just take the fucking coffee and go," Levi finalized as he reached for his coat. Sharp eyes caught a quiet smile forming on Eren's lips.

"Alright," the emerald eyed man replied.

They both were about the part ways when a figure caught Levi's eyes. Slender fingers slid it across the table toward him and a calm and sweet smirk formed on Eren's lips as he did so. "I'll leave this for you though... you know, just in case," he tried to say coyly.
Before Levi had the chance to respond, Eren had vanished. A glance and Levi could see Eren making his way through the busy streets outside of the shop through the window. He was already long gone out of Levi's vision when the older man finally glanced down at the table.

_Sneaky little brat_, Levi thought as he ran his fingers over a rectangle shaped business card. The name _Eren Yeager_ were seen across it loud and clear just like the young man himself. Levi glanced around quietly and indifferently before swiping the card up and placing it inside of his coat pocket before he made his way into the same streets Eren had disappeared only moments before.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the delay! I had the entire chapter written out and somehow it got deleted! I was so angry I couldn't write for a while. But thanks for all the kudos, comments and bookmarks. I hope this chapter and story reach your expectations. Happy reading!

Kudos and comments are love. Thank you!

(Revised 1/5/2019)
Strong and steady hands moved almost mechanically; shaping and rearranging metal upon metal. Eren's latest art piece wasn't exactly something he was proud of, but it had come from the heart. Art mesmerized Eren. Sculpting to pastel to metal figurines... it all appealed to Eren even at a young age. It was what he was good at, and it was also his escape. His escape from his profession, his family, his friends... everything. He enjoyed the small bubble he created for himself in the detached garage in the backyard of his family's home.

Those hands stopped when he heard the side door open to the garage with Mikasa following inside. She was out of her usual steady attire for the office and now in casual clothing. Eren could see the fatigue that clung to her face but Mikasa was always and forever would be incredibly capable of hiding it. She walked in slowly and stopped with a tilt of her head. "What is that supposed to be?"

Eren chuckled and moved another fragment of silver. "It's half of a man's face so far... not really sure where I'm going with it. It'll give me a hell of a mark on my next exam though."

Mikasa observed more closely and noted the metal spiraling into each other... but it was clear as day when she noticed a half a mouth, one eye and ear forming along the thick lines of the skull. Eren had always been an incredible and unique artist.

"A little dark, don't you think?" she asked.

Eren shrugged casually and wiped his hands on his pants. "It's an honest piece. There's a lot worse shit out there," he began while standing up. "Trust me, Google it sometime. Scary stuff."

Eren wiggled his fingers toward Mikasa, and she chuckled quietly. Eren began putting his supplies away but instantly noticed Mikasa was tensely standing at the end of the garage. He sighed knowingly and looked up at her after a few moments. "What's the matter?"
"What makes you think something is the matter?"

"You're all tense... not really talking either. Is there something wrong? Is it Mom?"

Mikasa shook her head quickly and waved her hands in front of her. "No! No... Mom's fine. Carla's fine. I... well," More tense movement on her end. Eren sighed almost dramatically this time with impatience.

"Spit it out already."

Mikasa dropped her hands in defeat. "Alright, fine. Annie invited me out to dinner tonight along with Krista, Ymir, and Sasha. We're all always so busy it's hard to make time to hang out with each other," she explained. "I don't usually take up on the offers, but it'd be nice to just be with them for a change and not the entire loud and rowdy group."

Eren's shoulders fell forward a bit as he started laughing. "Are you asking me if I'm okay with you going out?"

"Don't be a jerk. You know one of us needs to be here for Mom. I just wanted to make sure you weren't working or had other plans..."

Eren intervened quickly. He walked across the garage and stood in front of his sister. "Mikasa, it's fine. I'm fine. Go have a night out. You deserve it. I'm off tonight and actually **very** tired."

Mikasa looked relieved. "You're sure? I have leftover dinner in the fridge if you're hungry. You've been here for hours, and I didn't want to bother you. I won't be long either—"

Eren began shoving Mikasa out of the garage. "Shut up and just go out. I'm 23 years old. I can handle the house without you," he began. Mikasa moved out of Eren's grip. "Just be careful. Enjoy yourself. I could use some quiet anyway."

And quiet he had.

Eren spent a few more hours inside the detached garage before entering the house and making
himself some dinner. His mind was on auto pilot. His mother was resting inside of her room, and he
had poked his head inside to peek in on her. When Eren knew she was sleeping soundlessly, he
moved to the couch and plopped down unceremoniously with his plate in hand. He ate quietly and
watched a bit of TV for the next half an hour before his phone vibrated quietly inside his side pocket.
Fork still inside of his mouth, Eren retrieved the phone and unlocked it.

"Eren Yeager, your services have been requested for November 20 at 10:00 pm at address 11322
83rd and 5th. Dress accordingly. Requester name: Nile Dok."

Eren moved in one swift motion and sat forward, staring at his phone with wide eyes. *Shit... I can't
take this client. I don't have anybody here to stay with Mom. I'm... going to have to decline.*

Nile Dok was the owner of a large variety of banks inside of the city. His family's name was very
well known. Although Eren had never personally met the man, with a few minutes of searching on
his phone, Eren was able to get quiet a bit of information on him... just as he had with Levi.

*He's loaded... no doubt about it. Dammit...*

Just then, Carla had exited her room and tiptoed into the kitchen. She grabbed hold of her
pocketbook and keys. Eren turned around on the couch to stare at his mother. "What're you doing?"

"Going next door. Hannes was making dinner, and he invited me to join him," Carla had explained
nonchalantly.

The brunette stood up from the couch now, eyes wide. "Are you sure that's a good idea? What if you
have a dizzy spell? A seizure? What if something happens and we aren't here to help y—"

Eren's mother moved across the living room and placed a loving hand on Eren's cheek. "You're such
a good boy. I couldn't have asked for a better son," she said with endearment. "But I can handle
myself. I'm right next door and we both know Hannes won't let anything happen to me. So please..."
Carla's head dropped a bit, her chin dipping into her neck. "Please... have a night to yourself. I'll be
fine," she clarified.

Eren suddenly embraced his mother, unsure as to the reason why. Carla stood in stiff surprise before
her arms wound around Eren. "What's this for?"
"Just because," Eren muttered in reply before moving away from her.

When Carla had left, Eren had dressed in his best and left the house. He allowed himself a quick chance to grab a drink at the local bar he and his friends gone to on almost a daily basis. When Eren had walked in, it was busy as usual. From the corner of his eye, he could see Mikasa sitting in a booth with a few of his friends. Specifically Annie, Sasha, Krista, and Ymir. A few tables away, Eren had noticed Armin with Jean, Marco, and Connie. Eren did his best to remain indifferent. *I'm here on business — nothing else. A quick drink to calm my nerves...*

Eren leaned against the opposite side of the bar and did his best to avoid eye contact with anybody. His hair was pushed back from his face earlier, and now it had fallen in front of his view. He wore a dark long sleeve dress shirt and black slacks to match. His shoes, old as they may be, complimented the outfit entirely. Eren didn't know a damn thing about fashion... but he prided himself on how he'd learn to represent himself for his clients.

Eren was served his first drink for the night and sipped on it slowly. He could never entirely squander the feeling of anxiety he felt with every new client he met. It was as if he was being thrown into a den of wolves. He had had his fair share of bad experiences... it had come with the job after all. But he took it in stride. Eren was proud that he could easily defend himself. No man was ever going to take advantage of him. Eren glanced down at his phone. *9:27... I still have a bit of time to kill.*

One drink had turned into quite a few, all of Eren's nerves fried and warped from the previous weeks of stress and tension. It felt good to let loose a bit. Especially without Mikasa breathing down his neck. He loved her very much; would do anything for her... but it was nice to be out on his own, just for himself, once in a while. It was a rare moment when Eren really, truly had time for himself. Not his job. Not his family. Just himself and sometimes just him and his art. He was thankful for the detached garage.

With a small wave of his hand and a sigh, Eren paid his tab and took caution when leaving the building. The last thing he wanted to do was explain to any of his friends why he was here. Although Annie, Reiner, and Bertolt were the only ones who knew... he trusted them to stay quiet.

Eren took a cab instead of walking. It was late, and he wasn't very familiar with where he was going. He stared at his phone and then looked out the window. He hoped tonight would go by quickly. Eren couldn't help but wonder why a man with so much money would pursue him. There were a lot more people to choose from. Sometimes Eren would have loved to of gotten inside of someone else's mind just to see what their thoughts were when looking at the line up of escorts online. What did they see in him? He was fortunate... if it weren't for his looks or his ability to adapt so quickly, his mother would have had no hope for the trial coming up.
Eren's head whipped up. "Oh! I'm sorry," he quickly said while reaching into his pocket for his wallet. He handed a few dollar bills over and proceeded to exit the car. When the driver pulled away he was glancing up toward a string of luxurious town homes. All painted in the same white and beige colors. They screamed wealthy and it made Eren nervous. *You've dealt with people like this before... it's fine, it's going to be fine. Just act natural. If you're lucky... maybe you won't have to sleep with someone.*

Eren doubted the thought even to himself. He had long accepted that sex just came with the job. There were rare occasions, however, where he'd only be required company rather than a sexual partner. Given Nile's looks... Eren doubted that.

When Eren found himself standing in front of the door, he did his best to remain inconspicuous and unseen. It was late, and he didn't appear to look anything than formal casual. Sometimes he thought people could see right through him... so far he had been lucky.

The door opened quickly, and Eren was staring into deep hazel eyes. Eren felt himself swallowing down his anxiety and put on his best smile. The man wasn't entirely... unattractive. He had some qualities to him that Eren found were pretty nice. The man tilted his head with polite curiosity.

"My names Eren, it's nice to meet you," Eren began, his smile widening a bit. "You're Nile Dok?"

"That'd be me. Please, come inside."

When Eren entered the town home, he silently marveled at the sight of the inside of it. Lavish and decorated almost professionally. It wasn't typically something he'd ever go for himself. Eren was used to conserving his entire life. Nile had led Eren down a long hallway that expanded into the living room. "Relax and sit down. You want a drink?"

Eren watched Nile move toward a bar on the other side of the room. Taking a seat and removing his thin jacket, the brunette nodded his head. "Sure, that'd be great."

Emerald eyes observed as Nile prepared their drinks. He made it a diligent habit to always watch in case a client slips something inside. Annie had been the one to warn Eren on that one, and he was forever grateful to her for it. The man walked back over and handed Eren a small cup of what appeared to be scotch or rum. It was a dark cloudy liquid. Eren took a tentative sip of it and
"Too strong?" Nile asked, a hint of playfulness in his tone. Eren noted that there was a slight slur in his speech. He sounds a little drunk. Shouldn't have to worry, he might just be nervous.

Eren nodded as Nile took a seat next to him. He offered a quick smile. "Not my usual drink. I appreciate it though. Thank y—"

Words were cut off when Eren felt lips crash into his. It happened so fast his eyes widened like saucers. Nile's hands were already moving to unbutton the front of his shirt. Holy shit. Eren thought as he braced his hands against Nile's chest. He's fucking eager. Barely got through introductions.

Nile suddenly bit his lip; hard and Eren whimpered. It's okay; he tried to coax himself inside of his mind. You've dealt with this before. It's okay. Maybe he doesn't know how to act? He's giving me a lot of mixed signals. I'll try to slow him down...

Eren pushed against the other man's chest and successfully managed to get their lips to part with each other. "Hey, what's the rush? We've got all night to do this. There's no reason we have to be so quick." He felt breathless, and he could already feel the other man's erection pressing through his pants and against his thigh. His job was to provide good company and to please his clients to the best of his abilities. But Eren refused to lie back and allow someone to take advantage of him.

For a few moments, it seemed Eren's words had gotten through, and he felt a bit of relief. That's it. Eren's hands moved along the span of Nile's chest and continued their journey along his arms and shoulders. He had hoped it would calm the other man down while his mouth moved against his once more. His lips parted, and Eren had to defeat his disgust down as he tasted nothing but liquor. Nile seemed to be returning his movements touch by touch.

The relief that Eren felt had suddenly vanished when he felt himself being thrown onto his back on the couch. His head hit the arm rest, and it actually hurt a bit. Instead of unbuttoning his shirt this time, Nile ripped the front of it open. The brunette heard the distant sound of the buttons hitting the hardwood floor beneath them. It took a few moments to register what was happening before panic sweltered inside of his chest. Fuck. Fuck, he's either too drunk, or he's actually a fucking rapist. He's moving way too fast for me.

Not being as coaxing as before, Eren shoved the older man off of him. He was panting and grabbed the side of his shirt. "Didn't you hear me? I told you to slow down."
Nile wiped the corner of his mouth, and his gaze drifted off to the side for a second. "I've paid quite a bit of money for your company tonight, and I'm expecting to get exactly what I paid for," he stated while his eyes traveled back to Eren's.

Instead of kissing Eren this time, Nile grabbed the back of his head by his hair. His neck suddenly bloomed with pain as teeth bit the line of it. Eren's lips parted with a pained gasp. "You're a whore, aren't you? You're supposed to enjoy this sort of thing." Nile's free hands moved toward his belt and attempted to tug it open. Eren felt momentarily frozen before his eyes narrowed in fury.

Eren was able to maneuver his foot between himself and Nile while using all the force he could muster to kick the other man back. Nile landed on the floor with a loud thud, and Eren stood up swiftly. He wiped his mouth and scowled in disgust. "You son of a bitch. If you put your hands on me again, I'll fucking break them!"

He didn't give the man time to recover, didn't look back when he grabbed his jacket, ran down the hallway and out of the house. He paused for a moment before exiting. "Don't worry about your money either; you'll get refunded. We don't need your kind of business."

When Eren had gotten onto the main street, he was breathless. He wrapped his jacket around him as best as he could and aimlessly began walking. He was grateful for the coat. If it weren't for it, he'd be walking around with a half-open shirt. Eren felt a growl rip its way from his throat. Rat Bastard. If I didn't need this job so badly I would've kicked his ass.

After almost a half an hour of wandering Eren finally began to recognize his surroundings. His blood was still boiling. Whore.

Eren couldn't stop the word from ringing over and over again inside of his head. His eyes narrowed, and he did everything he could to hold back his frustrated tears as he continued to make his way down the busy streets.

Levi tried to ignore it.

After a horrendously long work week, he was finally in the comfort of his suite, sipping quietly on his glass of gin and going over graphs on his laptop. They were in the process of hiring a new art director and were falling through for a campaign line for Lexus as well as RE Supplements. It required too much of his damn focus, and it was becoming harder and harder to focus when that stupid fucking business card was sitting on his coffee table.
His body was riddled with anxiety and stress. He had become accustomed to it at this point in his life. Thirty-two years old and a widower wasn't exactly something he had foreseen in his future. Still, he had tried in the past to date. Endless failure and complete fucking idiots crossing his path had turned him off to the idea entirely. Levi was either too blunt with his honesty or rude with his opinions. Both men and women alike didn't seem compatible with him.

So after many failed attempts, he had become content with his solitude. Of course, sexual frustration had crept along the corners of his mind and ached inside of his body. He was human, and he couldn't deny it. Still though...

...an escort?

...and not just an escort, a very young escort. Eren was at least ten years younger than him.

As much as he wanted to punch Hange in their fucking face for the terrible stunt they had pulled, Levi also understood the logic behind the insane attempt. Straight forward, clean and nothing anchoring him to a relationship. The way the world viewed him didn't matter much to him. He'd grown used to pushing himself against society, and he wasn't about to change who he was just for the sake of outsiders.

Levi took an agonizingly long sip of his gin...

... and continued to stare at the business card.

_Fuck._

Levi's thoughts splintered between emerald eyes and light tan skin.

_Double fuck._

He closed his laptop and reached over to grab the card from the table. He stared down at it with a perplexed expression.
I could quickly get most of the fuckers at work off my back. Eren could actually help me if I paid him well enough... along with other things. Still, it just doesn't sit well with me. I've never...

Levi's hands gripped the card a bit tighter.

... I can't fucking believe I'm considering this. Maybe I am a miserable bastard.

The raven-haired man glanced around his apartment, gray eyes examining the empty surroundings with a flat expression. A dullness had placed itself in Levi's life, and maybe Hange did push him a bit to break that mold. Forcefully and against his will... but nonetheless it opened his eyes a bit.

Fuck it.

Levi battled the conflicting thoughts inside of his mind and reached over for his phone. He swiped his password on the main screen and glanced at the card of ultimate choice in front of him. He keyed in the numbers and began typing furiously. After a few moments, he looked over what he had written on the text messaging, and his finger hovered for a few seconds.

...send.

Levi exhaled a breath he didn't realize he was holding. He placed the phone back down on the coffee table and stood up swiftly to refill his glass of liquor.

Wednesday, 8 pm. Rose and Maria Bar. If you're going to help me, we are going to need to set up some terms.

Chapter End Notes

The kudos for this story are absolutely amazing! Thank you all so much! I have so much planned for these stubborn, adorable fools. I enjoy a conflicted Levi and a struggling Eren. I'm terrible. Please feel free to hit that little heart button drop a comment! Let me know what you're enjoying or what needs to be worked on.

Also, please make sure you read the tags. There is a bit of violence and sexual contact in this story. Both good and bad contact. You will be warned accordingly but come on... this is an escort we are talking about.
Thanks so much and see you next chapter!
Eren felt anxious.

More anxious than usual.

His hands were wrapped around the drink in front of him, ocean eyes downcast and staring. Who was he kidding? He was nervous as all hell. Eren's nerves were completely warped since the incident with Niles a few days before. He did his best to push it from his mind and keep himself on track. It was easy for his train of thought to derail from his objective, and he refused to let that happen. He continued with his usual's as per his request.

But the text from Levi Ackerman was not expected at all.

Eren had considered declining. He thought about telling the man to go fuck himself. For some unknown reason to even himself, he didn't. So he found himself sitting there as he practically tainted the air with his nervous energy, waiting for this enigma of a man to arrive.

It was only two minutes after eight when he watched the said man walk through the threshold and into the bar.

Levi, in Eren's opinion, looked more attractive sober. He was wearing a long, dark coat and deep blue scarf. He loosened it as soon as he had stepped inside and ran a hand through his hair to settle it from the outside wind. Eren felt his heart hammering in his chest, especially when he noticed quite a few eyes on Levi as he made his way toward the bar. Without sparing a glance at Eren, he stood next to him and just said, "Let's find a booth."

Within a few minutes, the two of them sat face to face. Levi had his arms crossed against his chest, an almost stoic and bored expression lining his features. Eren did everything in his power to fight wringing his hands together. He kept his composure as best as he could.
"So..." Eren and Levi both began simultaneously. Eren silenced himself as he watched the older man run a hand through his hair. He appeared uneasy.

"So... how does this work, exactly?"

The brunette drew in a steady breath. Levi himself was loosely running his fingers against his glass of liquor.

"Well... you tell me what services you're looking for and I name a price," Eren stated while taking a sip. "That's pretty much the basics of it."

Levi seemed contemplative. He gazed out of the dark windows the lined the edge of the building. "And those services would be...?"

"Company," Eren explained simply. "Pretty much in every aspect of the word. Whether it be gatherings, both professional or not, among other things..."

He had never felt this awkward explaining what he did for a living perhaps because he had never really had to.

"Fucking, you mean?" Levi replied nonchalantly.

Eren almost spits his drink out, and he felt the blush travel to his ears. "If you want to put it crudely, then yes."

"I'm realistic, kid. If we're going to do this, you had better get used to honesty."

"And what exactly are we doing?"

There was a heavy silence between the two of them that was drowned out by the noise around them. Ocean eyes met deep gray dead on without wavering.
Levi broke the silence first. "As far as terms go... I only have one," he began whiledowning the rest of his liquor. Eren noted a slight flush that appeared on Levi's face as he drank. "I'm to pay you directly, not through the company you work for."

Eren was surprised by this. "I'm not sure if that's allowed... I don't want to end up losing my job because I took an offer personally from—"

A sigh drew the brunette's attention away from what he was saying. He watched Levi reach into the breast pocket of his coat and slide a single item across the table. "Maybe that'll get you to shut the hell up, brat."

Emerald eyes looked down at a check. It wasn't a check he'd customarily received. This was a check for five thousand dollars.

Eren was surprised he hadn't fallen out of the booth. He stuttered, nonetheless. "I... I don't understand. You realize this is an insanely large amount of money, right?"

"You're going to question my judgment and my ability to count? You are something. I would've thought you'd be thrilled."

"No!" Eren exclaimed and realized how loud he was. He brought his voice down a few octaves. "No... that's not it. I... I don't understand why you're giving this to me I meant. There are plenty of other people in the agency that would better suit your needs. We hadn't exactly gotten off on the right foot the first time we saw each other. So excuse me for being surprised," he finished.

Levi made a small 'tch' noise. "If you need your curiosity settled, fine. I already know you. Well, I already know you better than a random stranger. You're professional in what you do as far as I can see. Finally, you're not exactly bad to look at either."

Eren felt his heart pounding at the last statement, but he kept that to himself. "Well..." he began while scratching the back of his head. "I'm flattered."

Levi made a small 'tch' noise. "If you need your curiosity settled, fine. I already know you. Well, I already know you better than a random stranger. You're professional in what you do as far as I can see. Finally, you're not exactly bad to look at either."

Eren felt his heart pounding at the last statement, but he kept that to himself. "Well..." he began while scratching the back of his head. "I'm flattered."

The raven-haired man remained indifferent. "As I was saying... I'm going to pay you directly. It'll ensure discretion."

Although Eren had been a bit skeptical of the idea, he reluctantly agreed. Nobody would have to
know... this was a secret between him and Levi.

Eren didn't understand why his stomach nearly coiled at the thought.

"So... when and where should be my next question," Eren disrupted the silence around them.

Levi guzzled the rest of his liquor down and brought his glass down thoughtfully. "Tomorrow night," he replied evenly. "I'm sure you remember where my apartment is? Unless you'd prefer somewhere else."

"Your place is fine," he asserted.

Levi nodded, again, his eyes seemed thoughtful and calculating. "You're clean, right?"

Eren almost sputtered on his drink a second time, clearly outraged. "Of course I am! Do you think I'm that stupid?"

"As I said, I'm honest. I'm about to sleep with a stranger, and I'd like to make sure I don't get fucking sick because of it," Levi replied almost smoothly.

He's... kind of got a point, I guess. "Right," Eren nodded. "I get it. To answer your question more clearly, I'm safe. You have nothing to worry about."

Levi drummed his fingers against his glass, and his gaze was almost flat while asking: "That's it then?"

Eren shrugged his shoulders. "I mean, that about covers the basics. Anything else you want to talk about we can do it tomorrow."

"Alright then," Levi stood from the booth, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a few bills to place on the table. "I'll see you tomorrow night. Anytime after nine would be appreciated."

Eren noticed the tenseness in Levi's shoulders and the rush of breath that left him as he spoke. If Eren
wasn't mistaken, he could see a flush spreading behind the older man's neck. For all of his big talk, Eren noted he was just as anxious as he, himself, was. It brought the brunette a bit of comfort.

"Yeah," Eren murmured as he stood up as well. "See you."

He hadn't realized that Levi was already out of sight.

Reiner whistled while holding Eren's phone close to his face. "Damn, he's pretty good looking."

Bertolt sighed a heavy sigh while bringing plates back into the kitchen. Reiner noticed quickly and coaxed the taller man. "Oh come on! You've got to admit the man is hot!"

Annie leaned and glanced at the smartphone. "He's pretty damn short," she commented dryly.

"Yeah... well, he makes up for it, I think. He's got some muscle on him, and I could tell even when he was wearing a coat." Eren explained while snatching his phone back. He decided to have a late dinner over by Annie, Reiner and Bertolt's apartment before going home. He needed someone to talk to, and Annie was the only person who understood what Eren went through daily. "He's a pretty good looking man. His personality is an entirely different story."

"Awkward?" Bertolt asked when he re-emerged into the room.

"More like an asshole," Eren muttered while taking a bite of his take out. "I don't think I've ever met a man this rude. Unless you want to exclude that dick from the other night."

"You never reported that?" Annie asked while she closed the lid on her food.

"I don't see any reason to," Eren responded honestly. "I handled it like I always do. He'll think twice before poking his head around the agency again."

"Levi's different though?"
Eren’s emerald eyes were thoughtful. "He doesn't give me a bad vibe... I don't sense hostility from him as I did with Nile. He might be an asshole, but he's brutally honest... and that's rare. I'd rather deal with that any day. Besides," Eren swiped through his phone. "He's a running up CEO to a major advertising company. How lucky did I get with that? You don't see a lot of young men doing that sort of thing."

Annie shrugged her lithe shoulders while Reiner and Bertolt sat down on the couch together. They fell into a comfortable silence as they watched a few shows together. "There’s also the fact he gave you a check for five thousand dollars," Reiner added in.

"Holy... seriously? Five thousand dollars?" Bertolt was sitting up more straight now. "Is that usual for you two?"

"Not really," Annie answered almost nonchalantly. "It does range though from the high hundreds to the thousands. It depends on the customer," she continued while never shifting her blue eyes from the television.

When the time was nearing almost eleven, Mikasa was beginning to call his cell phone. "Shit," Eren said while sitting up from where he was comfortable. "I've got to go before she comes looking for me. I didn't even realize how late it was," he added while sliding his coat on.

Reiner snorted while slurping a few noodles into his mouth. "She does realize you're with friends, right? Is she that overprotective?"

Annie, Bertolt, and Eren all shot Reiner the same flat look. "You'd think after all the years we've been here; you’d know the answer the that." Despite everything, Eren was chuckling a bit under his breath. "I'll talk to you guys soon, thanks for the late dinner." As Eren was turning the leave, he cocked his head a bit to the side and mouthed 'I'll call you' to Annie.

Eren rushed his way home, only to find Mikasa shifting the couch pillows to their normal position and turning the television off. When Eren stepped in, Mikasa immediately asked: "Where have you been?"

The brunette shrugged his coat off. "I went to Reiners to hang out with him, Annie and Bertolt," he explained. "I sent you a text. It's also not like I have to check in with you every couple of hours Mom," he threw in there teasingly, hoping to take the edge out of Mikasa’s voice.
Mikasa deflated a bit at that. "I know... it's just..."

"I know, I get it. Try not to think about the worst all the time, alright? You know I can handle myself."

The raven-haired woman nodded her head. "Carla's asleep," she stated. "She's all caught up on her medication for the night. No episodes... she had a good day," she continued. Mikasa seemed thoughtful when she said: "I hope we can get enough money together. The trials are approaching fast."

"We will," Eren responded confidently. He walked over the fridge and took a swig of a container of juice. He heard Mikasa make a noise of complaint, but he chose to ignore it. "Like I just told you, don't always assume the worse. We've gotten this far, Mikasa. We'll all get through this shit."

"You're right," Mikasa responded after a pause. "You're right, Eren. I'm sorry. Don't let me ruin your night with my negativity."

Eren walked over toward Mikasa and brought her into a half hug, both in sincerity and in jest. "You could never ruin my night, stop being so stupid." He started leading his sister toward the back of the house. "I'm fucking exhausted. Let's go to sleep before you say some more stupid crap." His attempt to lighten the mood seemed to work because Mikasa shoved him into a nearby wall; jokingly. He didn't want to admit how much it had hurt him. Damn, she was strong.

Eren poked his head into his mother's room, gazing into it for a few short moments before changing into a t-shirt and sweats. He dropped carelessly onto his mattress and stared up at the ceiling. His mind reeled with the events that had taken place today. He turned over onto his side, kicking the blankets away from him while closing his eyes. He couldn't stop his train of thought as it backtracked to deep, gray eyes and the sharp angles of their features. It was silly, and Eren knew it. But how long had it been since he was attracted to anybody in his line of work?

And he just didn't understand why.

Chapter End Notes

The support I've gotten for this story is incredible. It motivates me to update more quickly. Thank you all SO much! You're all amazing. We're getting deeper into the
rabbit hole here... let's see what happens.

Did I mention I'm sort of evil?

Kudos are love. And feel free to hit that little heart button on the bottom of the chapter OR drop a comment to let me know how you're feeling about the story. Thanks and see ya'll next chapter!

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I'm on tumblr! https://taintedashes.tumblr.com
#wovenstrings
Taste

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Levi gazed at himself in the mirror.

He leaned over the bathroom sink and gray eyes met his own within the reflection. Raven strands of hair were plastered to his forehead and he moved them aside. He looked unfocused; scattered. It was nine fifteen... which meant at any moment...

...at any moment, Eren would be here.

He made his way into his bedroom and looked through his wardrobe... deciding it casual or formal was best.

Fuck, he didn't know. What did you usually wear to meet with an escort?

He opted for a dark long sleeve shirt and darker slacks. He used water to push his hair back a bit and he steadily composed himself for the time that was to come. How were you supposed to prepare? What were you supposed to do?

Levi's eyes caught a quick glimpse of Petra's picture and he made it a point to turn it away again.

He was sitting on the couch now, his hands wringing together while he occasionally sipped on his glass of gin. His suite was dark with the exception of a few dim lights. Another point of not knowing what how to set the tone around him and Eren. Was this supposed to be...

...well, romantic?

The hell if he knew. All he knew was he did his best to obtain some sort of buzz before he decided last minute to back out of the deal.

As if on cue, there was a buzzing coming from his door. Levi stared at the door for a moment before
standing up and moving toward it to open it. When he did, his gaze met piercing emerald. Eren stood there in a semi-casual attire; dark slacks like himself and button down deep gray shirt. His hair was it's usual mess but it seemed to suit him, Levi noted.

It never occurred to Levi how young Eren really was. His face was riddled with youth and an open spirit, it reminded Levi a bit of himself when he was that young.

"Um..." Levi's train of thought derailed immediately. "...are you going to let me in?"

"Oh.

Levi hadn't realized he was just standing there, staring at the younger man. He wanted to mentally kick the shit out of himself.

"Right," Levi stepped aside.

Eren entered before him as he shut the door and locked it. He watched as the brunette carefully took his shoes off and placed them by the door. The movements were stiff; almost mechanical. Levi could tell Eren was nervous just being here. Levi couldn't deny he felt a bit of anxiety as well. Why was he doing this again? He silently pondered the answer to that question but couldn't seem to find resolve in an answer.

He suddenly needed more liquor.

"Make yourself comfortable," Levi muttered while making his way toward the kitchen. He popped the cap off one of the bottles on his counter while asking: "You want something to drink?"


Levi opened a cabinet to grab another glass and pour the other man a drink. He started pouring the contents into both glasses when he noticed Eren was there and staring at him. "There a reason you're watching me, brat?"

Eren smiled softly. "You can never be too careful."
Levi arched a brow at that. "...the hell does that mean?"

"I always watch if someone pours my drinks. It's practically protocol for this job."

Well shit.

"Huh," Levi grunted out. "You've had your drinks spiked before?"

"Not personally but I know a few people who have."

"That's... fucking shitty." Levi didn't know what else to even say to that. He walked over and handed the other man his drink. "Rest assured I have no interest in drugging you tonight."

Eren laughed at that and for some reason it made Levi's stomach tighten.

The brunette sipped his drink with caution while his eyes glanced around the room. He started walking over toward Levi's bookshelves that he had on the other side of the apartment. His fingers brushed against a few of the sculptures he had there; eyes bright with an intriguing shine. "Dali?"

Levi's brows furrowed. "You know Salvador?"

"A little bit," Eren admitted as he traced the giraffe sculpture. "The courses I'm taking require me to know a bit about history. It's a bonus since I enjoy seeing pieces like this."

"An artist I'm assuming?"

Eren shrugged a bit self-consciously. "Not so much an artist. I enjoy sculpting and painting. It's my major. There's nothing really special about that."

"Art is powerful. Don't underestimate yourself. Trust me, I've seen people do that sort of shit for years." Levi replied while sitting down on the couch and sipping on his drink.
Eren chuckled and moved his fingers away from the other pieces on the case. "Sorry," he said quietly. "I shouldn't be over here touching all of your stuff. That's rude of me."

"As long as you don't fucking break it, I could honestly care less. I'm surprised someone your age even knows who half these artists are."

Eren huffed a bit at that. "How young do you think I am?"

"Young enough to make me wonder why the hell you do this for a living," Levi responded honestly.

Eren's eyes were sharp when they turned on him; nostrils flaring. Emerald flared to life and it nearly sent a shiver up Levi's spine. "None of your damn business."

Levi didn't expect so much... *honesty* from Eren but he had been shockingly surprised at every turn so far. This wasn't some mindless moron who'd come here to have sex with him; there was much more to him than Levi had expected. Levi had spent a majority of his time online trying to research escort protocols and guidelines just to know what the hell he was getting himself into and Eren definitely did not meet that criterion.

"I'm sorry, that wasn't very professional of me."

Levi was surprised when he felt a pressure against his lap from where he was sitting on the sofa. He lifted his head up to see Eren straddling his waist; a coy smile playing on his lips. "If you're looking for a conversation, that's fine. But I have a feeling that's not why I'm here tonight." Eren's voice was dripping with that coyness again; that masked tone.

"No, I suppose not," Levi conceded, staring up at the brunette currently sitting on his lap. He took in the way Eren's hair fell in front of his face as he gazed down at him and the way his cheekbones settled. Levi, unfortunately, felt those thoughts travel to his groin area without a moment's hesitation.

The pressing against his lap felt like nothing in comparison to the pressure against his lips.

Levi felt a startled noise that bubbled inside of his throat when Eren leaned in and placed his lips on his own. It was a gentle pressure; chaste and soft. How long had it been, he couldn't help but
wonder. But Levi couldn't stop when his hands instinctively moved and placed themselves on Eren's hips as he began returning the advances. Eren didn't possess an overwhelming sweetness to his taste but he was sweet nonetheless.

Eren's hands traveled from where they were against Levi's legs and began to travel upward. His hands skimmed over the contours of the other's chest and held them against either side of Levi's face to deepen the kiss. Eren moaned quietly and the noise itself encouraged Levi to drag his teeth against the brunettes lower lip. When Eren opened his mouth readily, Levi felt something positively carnal claw it's way through his barricades. He sat forward a bit and his hands were now against Eren's back; gripping the shirt between his fingers and bringing the younger man impossibly close.

Fuck.

That was the only thought that seemed to short-circuit it's way through Levi's mind as his tongue caressed the others. Eren's hands continued to wander in an exploring manner and his head had tilted to the side as their kiss continued to rise in its intensity.

"Mm," Eren murmured against his mouth. He continued to let his hands wander, the journey ever maddening in both perspectives.

Until they rested against Levi's belt.

Levi broke away from Eren's mouth with a breathy gasp and stared at him. Eren met his gaze with intense eyes as he unfastened the older mans' belt and pulled it free from the loops of his slacks. Before Levi could begin to register what was happening, they were naked. How long had it been since he had felt skin against his own? It took everything inside of the man's self-control to not moan just at the contact itself.

Eren was seduction in human form.

Something inside of Levi's mind cracked like a whip and he suddenly locked his arms behind Eren; moving the other man to his back as he hovered above him. Levi balanced himself on one hand against the side of the couch while the other drifted from Eren's bare hip and upward. His hand briefly touched his neck and then traced his lips. Eren readily opened his mouth and this time Levi groaned. Not just at the motion itself but at the words that left the brunette's lips as he touched him. Eren's ocean eyes were hooded; regarding the older man above him with an enchanting gaze.
"Fuck me," Eren breathed against his fingertips.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhangers are fun...

...kind of.

Sorry for the delay! We have Hurricane Irma heading right toward us so we are preparing! The support for this story is overwhelming and it really inspires me. I cannot wait to post more as we continue our journey with these two stubborn fools. Feel free to drop a line or hit that little heart button. Cheer ya'll and see you next chapter! :)
Eren braced himself as he landed unceremoniously on his back, soft sheets beneath him as he fell. As soon as he had fallen he felt a weight press against the front of his body. Levi had moved above him and his hands were on the bed on either side of his head as he leaned down and caught Eren's lips with his own. Levi's movements were a bit jerky and uncoordinated. Eren could tell this wasn't a typical situation for the older man based on his actions alone. Still... Levi had transformed so quickly when their contact had initiated it made Eren's head spin.

Levi had always appeared so indifferent; uncaring and passive. It was refreshing and completely exhilarating to see this side of Levi Ackerman.

Eren did his best to keep himself in some sort of control because he could feel himself losing his grip. A cloudiness had settled inside of his head as Levi's lips left his own and started moving along the side of his neck. Teeth grazed his skin but it was carefully as if testing the waters, seeing what made him react or what made him recoil.

The whine that escaped Eren's throat had bubbled up on its own and it seemed to encourage the two of them further. You've done this dozens of times. He'd have to remind himself.

He continued to try to remind himself of that when Levi's hand brushed against his arousal and Eren's breath caught.

Levi had pulled back abruptly, face more flushed than the brunette had ever seen it before. His hair was sticking somewhat against his face and his eyes were narrowed more so than usual. Eren took a moment to let his eyes wander and it appeared Levi was doing the same. The was a flicker inside of the older man's gaze and Eren recognized it immediately.

Uncertainty.

Eren wanted to ask him if he should continue if he was perhaps moving too fast. Maybe this wasn't what Levi had wanted or it wasn't what he was expecting. Eren felt he should have done many
things at that moment but instead, his legs wrapped around the other man's waist and he tugged him closer.

Eren wasn't sure if he had imagined it, but he thought he heard Levi growl.

The night was a flurried frenzy, every agonizing second that passed made that heat intensify. Levi's hands against him, though they were unsure, were strong. They guided Eren's body closer as his fingers worked him open. The brunette's head tossed and turned, his breathing sporadic in its intensity as he felt the pressure inside of his stomach increase. Right, when he felt he couldn't possibly take anymore, Levi had surprised him when his fingers withdrew and he himself was pressing into his body.

Nothing, no matter how much preparing, ever braced Eren for this. The invasion of his body made every cell inside of him awaken and fuck if it still didn't feel so good. It made him feel alive. Levi's head was bowed above him and he was completely still. Eren couldn't tell if it was out of consideration for him or Levi's body itself was overwhelmed but he was silently grateful for the short moment to adjust.

When he felt the older man begin moving, Eren's hands didn't know where to go. They settled above him and began gripping the sheets beneath his fingers. He nearly tore at the fabric at the onslaught of heat that surged through his stomach again. The low groans he received from the Levi, the soft sounds that he tried to hide were gratifying to Eren. More so than he'd like to admit, it encouraged him to sound his praise back to him.

You've done this dozens of times, he reminded himself yet again as his moaning became frantic.

Levi's forehead was pressing against Eren's shoulder and the brunette turned his head without realizing what he was doing. He kissed the side of Levi's neck and his teeth grazed cautiously against the skin. Levi's skin smelled earthy, it was a comforting scent that wasn't overpowering. In return for his advances, Levi's hand traveled and gripped his erection again.

His vision churned for a moment and his legs locked around Levi's waist. The fire inside of his belly had finally ignited to the point where it was too overpowering to bare. When their release approached, Eren bit his lip hard to stop himself from screaming. Levi's body stilled and his shoulders appeared to tense as his teeth gritted in a silent effort.

And it was over.
Eren’s hand was on his chest and he tried to level out his breathing. Levi had moved to lay beside him, shielding his eyes with his arm as he also tried to recollect himself. Their breathing was the only thing that they could hear inside of the room.

Exhaustion was settling with both of them but before they had fallen asleep, Levi was standing up out of the bed and Eren watched with quiet interest as he entered the bathroom inside of the master bedroom. When the older man returned, he held out a towel toward the brunette. Eren took it gratefully, happy to not have to sleep in a sticky mess. Judging by the appearance of Levi's suite though, this was more for himself than for Eren's comfort.

Levi settled back into the bed and the two of them were on their backs, staring up at the ceiling. Eren couldn't tell if Levi was still awake or asleep at this point and made an effort to not turn and look at the man. There was always an uncomfortable silence that hung in the air once the job was done. It never seemed to get easier for Eren either.

Sleep took him more quickly than he had anticipated.

Eren was quiet as he rose from the bed. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, it's bright red numbers had read five in the morning. Emerald eyes traveled and met the sleeping figure of the chief executive. Even in his sleep, Levi's lips held a deep frown and his brow was creased as if in concentration.

You've done this dozens of times.

It was a silent mantra at this point. Eren wasn't sure what he was accomplishing by repeating the same thought over and over again but it helped with his resolve of stepping quietly into the living area and collecting his clothes from the floor. He silently went into the bathroom and dressed as quickly as he could. Not bothering to even attempt to settle his hair, he brushed a hasty hand through it and left the bathroom. He'd have to either go to the agency to change or sneak into the house without waking his mother. Mikasa was more than likely getting ready for work as he stood there, contemplating what to do next.

Eren took a few moments to grab Levi's discarded clothing, folding it and placing it against the armchair on the other side of the living room. Double checking his surroundings one last time, Eren walked across the room and opened the door. He slipped through it while turning the lock and closing it behind him.

Levi had opened his eyes slowly, groggy and disoriented. He groaned and sat up in bed, desperately needing some sort of pain reliever. Or a drink. Perhaps both. He pulled the covers away from his
bare body and—

—the memories of last night abruptly crashed through his mind.

His gaze wandered over toward the other side of the bed. He wasn’t surprised when he discovered it was empty.
"You know... Christmas is only a week away," Mikasa said.

Eren tugged his coat more closely against his body as the brisk December air whirled around him, tousling his hair and burning his eyes. He, Mikasa and Armin were just leaving campus and going to grab some coffee from their favorite little cafe. The weeks since that night had passed by more quickly than Eren had realized. He couldn't believe the holidays were already coming and going. Thanksgiving was a quiet affair; just the three of them along with Hannes from next door. Eren noted with quiet curiosity the amount of time Hannes and his mother were spending together. He felt a burn of over-protectiveness swell through him but he quickly squashed it down. His mother deserved someone to enjoy. Friend or more, Eren knew he trusted their neighbor after all of the times he had been there for the three of them.

Those thoughts aside, Eren's mind kept backtracking to the events that transpired between him and Levi Ackerman. He remembered with certain clarity the way his skin burned when the other man touched him and the way his dark eyes seemed to bore into his. Eren's cheeks burned and he knew it wasn't from the sharp wind.

"This year is going by fast," Armin stated. "I'm excited about the break. It'll give me time to catch up on all of my studies."

Eren rolled his eyes. "Like you need catching up on anything. Breaks are meant to do... you know, fun stuff. Not sit in your room with your nose buried in a book."

Eren nudged Armin as they walked, causing the two of them to chuckle. The light air around the three of them eased the tension Eren felt in his heart. He couldn't place it... but that nagging feeling didn't seem to go away.

When they had arrived at the cafe, it was busier than usual. Out of towners and locals alike coming in order hot beverages to ease the coolness of the weather. They were able to luckily find a booth and the three of them sat down and removed their coats.

"In all seriousness, I'd like to do something nice this year. I know Carla would love it too." Mikasa said while reaching for the specials menu on the table. "We're really tight this month though."
Eren practically felt the drop in his sister's tone. "Mika, don't worry about that. We'll still be able to do something nice." He didn't need to mention he had specifically put money aside for Christmas alone. He didn't just want to do something nice for his mother but also Mikasa. She worked double shifts and went to school, same as Eren. She deserved it.

"How is Carla doing?" Armin asked as he reached to take the menu. He brushed a few strands of his blonde hair behind his ear as he looked down.

As Mikasa and Armin continued to banter, Eren's phone had vibrated in his pocket. He reached and brought it into his hands along the table and did his best to stop his heart from stuttering inside of his chest. A clear picture of Levi Ackerman and Erwin Smith appeared on his screen along with a lengthy article regarding their current projects. Eren inwardly groaned. He hated that this short, brash and utterly infuriating man has crawled under his skin somehow. It made Eren question every action he was taking but he quickly pushed the thought away. This was a business arrangement. Nothing more. Nothing less. Levi was only using him for his services and Eren would do good to remember that.

"I'll go place our orders," Mikasa had interrupted his thought train and stood up to go to the counter. When she was gone, Armin leaned his elbows on the table and place his head in them.

"You seem thoughtful today," Armin said quietly. "Everything alright?"

Eren wished with everything he had that he could talk to Armin but he knew it'd be unwise to do so. So instead of confiding in his best friend, he simply grinned at the other male and laughed a bit. "Of course everything's alright. I'm just tired from working so much, and I guess I'm just a little worried about Christmas coming up..."

Well, that was plausible.

Armin returned Eren's smile. "Don't worry too much, I know you. I'm sure you and Mikasa will come up with something. Remember, Christmas is about togetherness, not gifts. It's just an added bonus."

When Mikasa returned with piping hot cups of coffee and cocoa, Eren continued to do his best to school his features and not let anybody know what was really bothering him. He wished he could say it got easier with each passing day but it really didn't.
The cafe Eren had been in earlier lacked in comparison to the lavish restaurant he was currently sitting in. Tonight he was sitting with his latest client, a woman named Julia, and a few of her clients from the company she worked for. He had met with her once or twice and it always seemed to be him attending dinner parties with her rather than sleeping with her. Eren was silently grateful for that. She was attractive and probably in her thirties. She had short blonde hair and very deep honey eyes. She dressed appropriately and seemed to know just what to say and when to say it. Eren wondered why she didn't just have a boyfriend of her own since she appeared so well put together.

Perhaps some people just prefer different company.

Eren was fortunate that not much of the conversation was directed at him. He politely introduced himself upon arriving and had smiled and nodded during the entire affair. It was pretty boring if Eren had to be honest with himself. During times of deep political and business conversation, Eren's emerald eyes wandered around the room. There were various parties, same as them, having dinner while discussing something equally as boring as what Eren was enduring now. He'd at times poke around his chicken and stare at the glasses of wine on the table. He'd even had a few glasses just to ease the boredom. But Eren also couldn't complain when a client was willing to pay a thousand dollars for his company. The clock was ticking for the hospital trial and the holidays were already there. Eren needed every dime he could scrounge up.

As Eren's eyes continued to roam over the room, a figure seemed to catch his attention. This particular figure was wearing an expensive dark suit and a gray tie. His raven hair was a stark contrast to the paleness of his skin. Eren leaned slightly to the side, trying to get a better look to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. As he leaned toward the side, the person's face was in better view and Eren's breath caught in his throat. Levi.

Levi was sitting across the restaurant with a group of what appeared to be work colleagues. Sitting across from Levi was Erwin Smith himself and next to him was an unfamiliar woman with glasses and deep chestnut hair. There were several others sitting at the table and they appeared to be foreign. Eren assumed they were there for a meeting.

Eren hadn't realized he was leaning so heavily to the side, his hand that was bracing against the table slipped. He let out a distressing sound of surprise and slipped from his chair and fell onto the floor. The noise of him falling was well heard throughout the area and most of the eyes in the restaurant turned toward him, including Levi's.

Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh shit, holy shit--

The passive expression Levi always seemed to wear crumbled momentarily, a flash of recognition
seen in his dark eyes. Eren wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole.

"Oh my goodness, are you alright?" Julia had stood up from her chair to help Eren to a stand, along with a waitress who was coming by.

Eren nodded hastily, brushing himself away from the two women trying to help him. "I-I'm fine! I'm sorry, I must have slipped from my chair." He ran an anxious hand through his hair and smiled a bit sheepishly. "I'll... I'll just go clean myself up really quick."

Eren moved to make a hasty retreat and as he passed Levi's table he noted the man's eyes were glued to him.

*Just kill me now. Oh, my God, I can't believe that just fucking happened!*

Once Eren was behind the safety of the large bathrooms doors, he tilted his head down to make sure no other people were inside the stalls. He let out a frustrated whine and moved to the sink. He stared at himself in the mirror with a deep frown. "Smooth. Real smooth. Everyone in there probably thinks I'm a fucking moron now. Oh my God, he saw. He had to of known I was looking right at him."

Eren shook his head and turned the water on to splash some on his face. He repeated the motion a few more times and stood up straight to reach for a paper towel. As he did, he could see someone standing behind him in the mirror and he let out a surprised yelp and spun around.

"You fall out of chairs often or is this a new thing?"

Levi was leaning against the door frame inside of the bathroom with his arms crossed, tilting his head with an amused air around him. Eren tried not to make the grinding he was doing with his teeth audible. Of course, he had followed him in here--

When Eren didn't answer, Levi sighed and walked toward him. He reached for the paper towel in Eren hand and brushed it roughly against his cheek. "You missed a spot, brat. Must have gotten something on your face when you hit the floor."

Eren snatched the paper towel from Levi's hands and dried his face quickly before moving to toss it in the garage. "I don't need your help or need you following me in here. I'm already embarrassed enough. Did you come in here just to poke fun at me?"
Levi's expression softened just a bit at that, although not much. "What brings you to Lumièr.de des étoiles? I don't see this being a place you visit on a regular basis. Or at all, actually."

Eren's jaw clenched a bit. "You know why I'm here."

"Oh, that's right. Which one is it out there? The brunette who doesn't shut the fuck up or the blonde bimbo sitting across from you?"

A part of Eren kind of wanted to laugh. "None of your business."

Levi didn't seem to make any more comments after that. He walked over toward the sink himself and proceeded to wash his hands. Eren noted he was washing them once and then putting soap on them and doing it again.

"She's a new client..." Eren found himself saying. Levi looked up into the mirror as he spoke. The brunette shrugged a bit. "The blonde one. It's just dinner, in case you're assuming otherwise."

Levi smirked a bit and it sent a thrilling tingle up Eren's spine.

Eren didn't know what to make of the situation. They were standing in a bathroom together with the most awkward air around them. Eren found himself shuffling around on his feet and looking down on the floor. Levi had finished washing his hands for the third time and turned back toward him. "You'd better get back to your date before she assumes you fell in here too."

Levi straightened his tie and moved passed Eren and toward the door. Eren's eyes moved on their own and watched the other begin to leave before Levi stopped walking. Eren raised a brow when Levi turned back around toward him.

"Are you available on Thursday?"

Eren was taken aback by the question, but he found himself nodding anyway. "Yeah, I am."
"You interested in going to a shitty company party with me? I'd pay you, of course."

"Of course," Eren echoed. He wasn't sure why the thought of seeing Levi again was both frustrating and exhilarating. "Not to be rude, but you don't seem like the company party kind of guy."

Levi's lips twitched a bit but his face remained still. "Erwin will rip me a new asshole if I ditch out this year. We have executives from sister companies that'll be there. And I'd rather have someone suffering with me than show up alone and get a shit ton of questions."

Eren felt a little apprehension at the thought of being inside of the main building of Smith Advertising. With Levi's employees on top of it. But he felt himself agreeing anyway. "Alright, then. I'll be there."

"Send me your address and I'll send a limo to get you. It'll make things easier if we travel together."

The brunette nodded and Levi ran a quick hand through his hair. "Well, I need to get back out there to my shitty guests. I suggest you do the same."

As both men exited the bathroom, Eren couldn't help the small smile that was playing on his lips.

When Eren had gotten home, the house was silent and dark. He was grateful that everyone was already asleep it seemed. He undressed in haste and went straight to the bathroom to shower. As he stood beneath the hot stream of water, he closed his eyes and tried to push the thoughts of everything that had been happening from his mind. He failed miserably and his mind kept backtracking to Levi.

Eren felt as if he didn't understand himself anymore. There had been times Eren would be attracted to a client and that's normally as far as it went. None of them had ever intruded on his very thoughts the way the raven-haired man was doing so right now. The feelings that had surged through Eren during their last encounter surprised even himself.

He just didn't understand it.

Eren sighed in defeat and finished his shower. He dressed in a large short-sleeved shirt and sweatpants. After dressing he let out a dramatic sigh and fell onto his bed. He found himself staring up at the ceiling, everything and all aspects of his life swirling around his brain. What he wouldn't give just to close off his mind and shut out the thoughts. Now with Levi thrown into the mix, Eren thought his brain would split from the pressure.
Eren fell asleep that night dreaming of gray eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, you are all amazing. The love you've shown for this story is wonderful. Thank you so much! I apologize if this felt like a filler chapter but I promise you the next chapter will be so worth it. (Wink, wink.)

I love writing these two. Their emotions and conflicts as just so natural for me.

Thanks for being patient and as always, kudos and comments are love so feel free to hit that little heart button!

See ya'll next chapter, cheers!
What the fuck am I doing?

Levi was asking that of himself quite a bit lately. He was never one to question his own actions let alone his own sanity.

...alright, that last part may not have been true but still--

His previous encounter with Eren was meant to be just that, an *encounter*. A sexually motivated, convenient, *one time* encounter. So why the hell did his lips move on their own accord before his brain could figure out the string of words leaving them? He recalled that night-- the way Eren had felt pressed against his lap and the way he teased his lips with his own. He remembered the softness of his hair and the way he arched beneath him. Levi had never considered himself a very sexual being by any means but dammit, sex was *wonderful*. Particularly, sex with *Eren* was wonderful.

What's more, Levi couldn't believe Eren had actually *agreed* to see him again.

Levi snorted as he stowed away files on his desktop. He starting organizing around his desk as he prepared to leave for the night. He had stayed late just to keep his mind busy from thinking back to that snarky little *brat*---

"Levi, you're still here?"

Levi's gaze rose up and met Erwin's, who was standing inside of the door to his office. He hadn't noticed how late it had actually become as the clock on his screen read seven sixteen pm.

"I was just getting ready to leave," he stated while grabbing his briefcase from the ground. "I wanted to catch up on some shitty side projects before we close on Thursday and meet with Netsuke and Darius."

Deep set eyebrows rose. "You'll be attending the party on Thursday?"
"Why, are you surprised?"

"Truthfully, very."

_I seem to be doing a lot of that lately. Doing shit I don't normally do._

"Well, color yourself surprised. I'll even be bringing a guest with me."

Levi got a small hint of satisfaction when Erwin's face was contorted with wonder. "You? Bringing a guest?"

"For fuck's sake, don't look too shocked or anything." Levi snapped as he made his way out of his office.

Erwin followed him as he began to take his leave. "Would this guest happen to be... a date?"

Levi shrugged as he made his exit. "Who knows these days," he muttered and stepped into the elevator. He tried to hide a smirk when the doors closed, leaving behind a bewildered Erwin Smith.

When Levi was out of sight, Hange had made their way out of their own office and stood beside Erwin. "Did I just hear correctly our little duckling is attending the holiday party this year?"

Erwin nodded. "Apparently."

Hange tapped a finger against their chin. "That is interesting."

"He also says he'll be bringing someone with him."

"Oh!" Hange clapped their hands together. "That is very interesting! I wonder who the little morsel will be!"
Erwin's sharp gaze was on Hange within seconds. "Do you happen to know something about this?"

"Hm? Me? Absolutely not! I'm just as in the dark as you are, dear."

Erwin didn't buy it. Still, he sighed. "I'm happy to see he's participating more in the company. He's an executive chief, I need him to start acting like it. Perhaps that short break did him some good after all."

Erwin didn't see the small smile Hange had playing on their lips. "Oh, I'm sure it did."

Levi took a long swig of his gin and placed it on the bathroom counter. He reached to adjust his tie and tried to do something with his hair. When he found himself to some level of satisfaction, he clicked the light off and made his way out of the apartment suite. He reached for his phone to catch a glimpse at Eren's address and felt a brow furrow when he realized they were meeting at a public place rather than his home.

*I suppose that makes sense. I'm sure his family doesn't know what he does for a living.*

The December air was brisk and sharp with a chill. Levi adjusted his long coat and approached the limousine that was waiting downstairs for him. He told the driver where to go and reached for another drink that was generously provided with the vehicle. He did what he could to drown out his nerves from skidding all over the place. The driver had pressed the privacy window to a close and Levi was grateful for the moment. The window ensured nobody could see on either side nor hear very much. Levi leaned forward and brought his hands to his head, letting out a shaky sigh.

"What the fuck am I doing this for?" he questioned himself as he felt the limousine come to a stop. Levi straightened himself up and stepped outside onto the sidewalk. As he stepped out, his breath caught when Eren came into his view. He was standing outside of the local bar they had originally arranged their meetings at.

The brunette was wearing dark suit complimented with a deeper colored vest. Beneath the vest, Levi noticed a gold tie and it complimented Eren's eyes more than the younger man may have realized. He was wearing a short, dark coat above it all. His hair was as jostled as ever but it seemed to suit him either way. Eren's eyes met his and he seemed to take a moment to appreciate how he looked as well.

"Hey."
Great start, you fucking moron.

"Hi," Eren replied.

That's two whole words down.

Eren made his way and whistled as he looked at the vehicle. "Wow, nice ride."

"It has its perks," Levi replied. He reached for the door and opened it for Eren. "We'd better get going. Erwin fucking despises tardiness."

The ride to Smith Advertising was uneventful. Bare minimal conversation with the occasional offers of drinks. Eren didn't appear quite as tense as Levi although he did seem a bit anxious.

"A few things," Levi began as they approached their destination. "You're going to be forced to meet a lot of stuck up, self-entitled assholes who think the world owes them something. Do yourself a favor and just smile and nod when it's appropriate. That's what I've pretty much been doing half of my life. Secondly, you'll meet a few of my colleagues, brace yourself because most of them are fucking whack-jobs who don't seem to know any better. Other than that, drink and be merry I guess. You're allowed to have a good time if that's even possible there."

Eren burst out laughing, nearly spilling his drink. "You get straight to the point, don't you?"

"Always, I don't waste my time with sugar coating. I'm pretty sure I covered that when we first agreed to this."

The brunette shook his head. "You're missing the point, I actually find it kind of refreshing. Usually, the people I meet with are too full of themselves or too polite to speak their mind. I can appreciate your honesty... well, to a degree I suppose."

Levi's eyebrows shot up. "Well... cheers to me continuing to surprise you then."
They finished their respective drinks and Levi wondered if the alcohol was affecting his interactions with Eren. The younger man seemed... okay, being in his company. It made Levi's heart race and he wished he fucking understood why.

When they entered the building, they took the elevator up toward the main floor they usually held their gatherings and company parties. Levi had attended a few of them on occasion with Petra and it was always the utmost boring experiences of his life. He was always grateful that she'd tag along to endure the suffering with him. It was a horrific experience when Levi had tried to do this on his own and received nothing but questionable glances and pitying sighs. He absolutely refused to put up with that bullshit another time.

The floor was completely packed and Levi thought he'd have a panic attack right then and there. He hated large crowds.

Levi felt a bit more relaxed when he realized Eren was standing close next to him. It made the walk into the crowd much easier. On that particular floor, there were lights and lavishly decorated streamers and ornaments all around. The soft hues from the lighting reflected off of the rich tile beneath them. There was a Christmas tree in the center of the room that glowed with a stunning display. All around them were buffet tables set up with decadent horderves and desserts. The tables were adorned with white and gold clothes and dinnerware. The entire display was over the top but the guests, from what Levi could hear, were absolutely astounded by the arrangements.

"So..." Eren began, his eyes wide with wonder and excitement. "Am I here as a simple dinner guest or an actual date?"

Levi had already hinted he was bringing a date to Erwin himself when he snapped at him earlier that week, so there was no backing down now. In response to Eren's question, Levi lifted his arm and wrapped his around Eren's. It was a simple gesture but it still caused Eren to look down at their arms. His brows creased questionably but than he smiled.

"Alright then," he responded.

Levi felt eyes on him as he and Eren advanced through the massive amount of guests. Most of them were from other floors in the building or from companies they worked along side with. A few of them were from out of the country while some of them were simply from out of state. Levi never recognized any of them nor did he care. When he took this job to work under his long time friend, though, Levi knew he'd have to learn to pretend when it came to giving a shit. Levi wanted to laugh at the irony of constantly trying to live up to what was expected of him rather than what he wanted.
Levi didn't pay anybody any mind. His main focus, surprisingly, was his and Eren's joined arms. Everything within the passed few weeks had been a strange whirlwind of confusion between the two of them. When Erwin Smith and Hange Zoe had come into view, the surprise was clear as day on their faces. It added more to Levi's already racing thoughts.

"Good of you to join us, Levi," Erwin said as he approached the two of them. Erwin was dressed as sharply as usual, this time wearing a tan suit with a dark tie. Hange wore a elegant jumper that even Levi had to admit looked unusually nice on them. Erwin reached and out of habit Levi returned to shake his hand. The point of all of this was always for appearances. "And you might be?" Erwin inquired when his attention had shifted from the other man.

"Ah, Eren Yeager, sir," Eren stammered a bit but extended his hand to return Erwin's handshake as well. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Smith."

"Erwin is just fine, please, Eren."

"Right," he said as he withdrew his hand.

Eren felt a bit uneasy when the person standing next to Erwin had started moving increasingly closer to him to the point where their faces were almost touching. "Um... hello?"

"Knock it off, Hange." Levi scoffed.

"Don't be such a party pooper, Levi." The other person, Hange, had responded. "I'm just getting a better look at this gorgeous young man! Oh goodness, where are my manners?" Hange had grabbed both of Eren's hands, shaking them enthusiastically. "Hange Zoe, at your service!"

"Nice to meet you," Eren responded hesitantly. Levi bit the inside of his cheek when he watched the two of them interact with one another. He could see a certain shine in Hange's eyes which meant they already knew who Eren was. But, Eren didn't seem to know who they were in turn.

Levi had made his rounds with Eren, Erwin, and Hange with him as he greeted and welcomed guests. He met with old and new contacts of campaigns alike. Having Eren with him seemed to ease some of his worries as he greeted others alongside him. He remained in complete control and never faltered with keeping up with the conversation. Levi didn't think he would have ever expected a shaggy brat like this to clean up so well and keep up with the pace, but he was man enough to admit to himself he was impressed.
"What is it you do for a living, Eren?"

*The fucking question of the night right here.*

"I'm going to school for Sculpture and Design. As a job, I work overnight at a warehouse across the city."

*Psh.*

Erwin seemed a bit thrilled with Eren's response. "An artist, I see."

"I suppose. It's something I really enjoy. I hope one day I can open up an art studio of my own or perhaps teach in the future."

While they were sitting at a lavish table within the chaos of the night, Levi took note of this. Erwin, Hange, and Eren indulged in a bit of conversation while sipping on wine and enjoying small meals. Levi couldn't help himself when he continued to watch Eren converse and take cautious sips of his drink. He hated himself for it, really.

Levi excused himself for some air.

He walked onto the balcony and stared out toward the skyline of the city. Lights sparkled and illuminated in the moonlight. He held a drink close by and sighed as he leaned against the railing. He didn't know what to think or how he should act. This was all overwhelming and new to him. All that seemed to speckle in his mind was a certain brunette with emerald eyes and unruly hair.

*Shit.*

"Hiding?"

Levi briefly glanced behind him and noticed Eren walking out toward the balcony with him. He smiled almost sheepishly and held out a glass toward the executive chief. "Thought you could use
Levi looked down at this glass and realized it was empty. "Thanks," he mumbled as he accepted. He drank quietly while the two of them stood out in the frozen air. "Hiding yourself?"

"Maybe," Eren chuckled while bracing himself against the steel railing. "You weren't kidding when you mentioned a few nut jobs."

"No shit," Levi replied. "I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did. Imagine working with them."

The night was thick around them. "This is nice," Eren stated.

"The party or outside?"

"Both," Eren admitted.

Levi tried not to stare, he really did. But the way Eren was bracing himself, leaning forward with an almost exhilarating look to him. Levi found it quite captivating.

"I'm... well, glad you're enjoying yourself."

He felt awkward all of a sudden.

"So..." Levi began. "Sculpture and Design, huh?"

Eren smiled a bit as he looked down at the sidewalk below them. "Like I told you... a hobby, mostly. But I'd love to use it in the future to teach others."

"And like I told you, art is powerful. Take it from someone who's been working with it for nearly a decade. This isn't just about the top of the line graphics and designs. There's much more to advertising than people believe."
Levi felt his heart leap into his throat when Eren raised his head and smiled at him. It wasn't understood or accepted fully, but fuck the way this young man was smiling at him in the dust of moonlight.

A commotion from inside caught both of their attentions, small chanting and cheering reaching their ears.

"What's going on?" Eren asked quietly.

"Fuck if I know," Levi replied as he tore himself away and led the younger man inside.

When they walked in, everybody within the parties reach was standing in a large circle. Levi's eyebrows shot up before they furrowed and a scowl was in place. "You fucking didn't," he growled. Hange was standing in the center of the chaos with hands clasped and a large grin.

"Don't be like that, sugar-plum!"

Eren looked as though he was ready to ask what the hell was going on when he noticed a large cake being wheeled in on a particular cart. He mouthed a silent 'o' when it was in everybody's view.

_Happy Birthday, Levi._

Erwin Smith was smiling himself when everyone gathered more closely toward the cake. "It shouldn't be overlooked that your birthday is approaching, Levi."

Levi felt a strong need to run and jump off the balcony when Eren casually caught his arm and looked at him with a questionable gaze. "It's your birthday?"

"On Christmas!" Hange piped in.

Levi glanced down at the cake once it was in his view. Deep blue and grays were surrounded by rich white frosting. He wanted to smash the damn cake with his bare hands but there were just too many important guests around them. So Levi took it with as much grace as he could muster. He cleared his throat and accepted what was to come. With Eren still holding his arm, endure the singing and the
candle blowing like a champ.

"Fuck," Levi muttered to himself after he blew out his candles, only loud enough for him and Eren to hear.

"Well, that was unexpected," Eren stated once they were in the privacy of the limousine.

Levi snorted as he crossed his arms over his chest. "If there weren't guests taking pictures, Hange knows I would have smashed that cake. They got lucky and caught me off guard."

Eren chuckled. "I think they were only trying to be kind, birthdays are important. You should celebrate too."

"Trust me, kid, Hange has ulterior motives for just about everything they do."

Silence fell over them like a blanket, only the sound of cars passing by could be heard. The privacy window had been brought up.

"That's also the person who hired your services behind my back," Levi added after a few moments.

Eren's eyes widened. "Oh, oh. Well... that explains a lot."

"It doesn't nearly explain enough," Levi muttered.

Levi noticed when the conversation died down, Eren was moving uncomfortably. The older man cocked his head to the side. "I appreciate you tagging along tonight. It wasn't the most exciting or practical affair but at least I didn't have to put up with that shit by myself."

Eren looked down at his hands and then back toward Levi. "You did pay me, you know."

"Still, you could have said no. I know our first meeting wasn't exactly fucking ideal."
"Well... when you're not drunk and screaming at people, you're actually pretty good company," Eren admitted.

Levi had to force the redness that threatened to stain his cheeks, especially when Eren moved from his place across from him and bent his knees onto the floor. "The fuck are you doing?" Levi asked when Eren was placing his hands on his knees.

"I wish I would've known it was your birthday in a few days, so I could have actually planned this out properly. Seeing that this is the only time we'll really have to ourselves tonight, I figured I'd give some sort of... present."

The last words came out in a breathy whisper and it sent a jolt through Levi's body and right to his groin. "Are you fucking crazy? There's a driver."

"Who can't see or hear us, right? So just sit back--" with those words, Eren pushed Levi further back against his seat as he spoke. "And enjoy yourself for once."

Levi wanted to protest, he really did. But all the words seemed to die down in his throat when Eren swiftly unbuckled his belt and reached inside of his trousers. In that moment, Levi hated his body. How it reacted on its own. How he suddenly felt starved for Eren to touch him more. As if by some unspoken request between them, Eren palmed Levi in his hand and the older man let out a shuddering breath.

"This is--" Levi attempted to say but it came out low, husky even. "such a terrible idea."

Eren's free hand touched Levi's chest and he laughed a bit. "I'm getting a much different signal right now."

Cheeky little brat.

Eren touching him had unwound him so much, he couldn't even describe what he felt when something hot and wet made contact with his erection. Levi bit his lip and did his best to contain any noise from leaving him. Eren's mouth, dammit his mouth was moving along his groin while humming quietly. His hands were placed against Levi's knees and then he tugged them apart, successfully falling in between them.
"Shit," Levi huffed when he felt Eren's tongue trail alongside his cock. Levi had leaned forward and buried his hands inside Eren's dammit it was soft hair, doing his utmost best to not tug at the strands that were caught between his fingers. Levi couldn't help himself, he groaned lowly as Eren increased in speed and fuck Levi didn't know how much more he could possibly stand--

Levi had wretched Eren's mouth away from him, causing the brunette to look up at him questionably. "What's wrong?" he asked breathlessly.

In response, Levi had leaned in and brushed his lips against Eren's. "W-wait, are you sure you want to do that? After... you know..."

"Considering I know exactly where your mouth has been," Levi responded in a primal voice that even surprised himself. His placed his hands on either side of Eren's face and crushed his lips against the others. Eren moaned when they connected and it made Levi's stomach somersault. He coaxed Eren off of his knees and backed him into the seat, moving his own hands to undo the others belt. Their mouths had never lost their contact, Eren's opening readily and Levi taking full advantage.

Eren moaned against his mouth when Levi had reached to grip the others erection, twisting his hand and causing Eren to jolt against the seat. In response, Eren reached and returned the gesture. Levi couldn't help himself, nor stop himself when he pulled away from Eren's mouth and glanced down at his face. It was contorted with a deep blush and his eyes, his deep emerald eyes, opened and closed along with the sensations running through his body.

Levi knew he was close, he felt the tightening inside of his stomach and the pulsing of his own blood roaring in his ears. Judging from the way Eren was writhing against the seat, he knew the younger man was approaching his release as well. Eren's voice was rising bit by bit until Levi wasn't sure if it was safe to let him continue. So when he felt Eren's body arch and his mouth open in a silent scream, Levi caught his mouth once more against his as they both reached their points of completion.

Levi and Eren straightened themselves up and parted ways. Levi remembered the way Eren looked up at him, an array of emotion behind his eyes he couldn't explain before Eren quickly let it dissolve. Levi wished he understood why this young man seemed to bring out something carnal inside of him that he didn't even know resided there, to begin with.

When he entered his cold apartment suite he sighed. He dropped his coat off on the arm chair and went straight toward the bathroom the shower. He stripped quickly and washed away all traces of that night. As if he thought if he did, he’d wash away the thoughts of Eren as well.
Unfortunately, nothing seemed to help with accomplishing that.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS I'M SO EXCITED! DID YOU SEE THE SEASON 3 PROMO PICTURE! WITH JUST EREN, LEVI AND KENNY? OMG! fesjignskgn;z. If you haven't already heard, Season 3 will be out July, 2018!!! I'm so damn pumped for this.

As always, your support is wonderful. Thank you all so much! I'm really enjoying writing this and have so much more planned. Kudos and comments are LOVE.

Happy Halloween ya'll!
"In conclusion to this quarter, we will be moving the meeting for the art directors to next week rather than this week while we wrap up with Lexus. The campaign has taken a significant amount of time and I'd like to thank all of you for your time and effort in this."

Levi was barely listening, staring directly into his cup of coffee and watching the dark liquid ripple whenever even the slightest movement would occur. It was nearing noon and the sun was shining painfully through the clear windows of the conference room. When Levi lifted his gaze briefly, he watched as Erwin continued to speak during their meeting while his associates, Hange, Mike and quite a few others progressed the meeting.

His mind back tracked to one person.

It was mid-February, one of the coldest months of the year. Over the course of those few weeks, seeing Eren had become a more frequent occurrence. He would go with him to events in regard to his job, they'd sometimes go out on their own; but most of the time, they'd be at Levi's residence. No matter where and when they seemed to meet, it always resulted in the two of them sleeping together.

Levi didn't understand it. It looked like a relationship and to him, it certainly felt like one. There would be times when Eren would just look at him with a certain gaze, both in public or private, and Levi would be reeled back in again. He wasn't exactly the right person to judge a relationship, all he had to base anything on was from his marriage to Petra and that was something else entirely.

In the end, it was all about money.

Levi tried to not fool himself. He wanted more than anything to stop all of this. But deep down, Levi knew he wouldn't. Or more so, he couldn't. Eren brought out something instinctual, almost carnal out of him that Levi had never felt with anybody else before. The way he'd smile or laugh at him, the easy air around him. They way he just look at him with one of the most intense gazes he'd ever seen before-- Levi felt ashamed to admit he just couldn't help himself. Levi would sometimes catch a ghost of a smile on the brunettes lips when they'd lay there in his bed, a hand to his heart while looking up toward the ceiling.

Is this what it meant to have feelings for somebody?
The topic of Eren's profession was never discussed again after his first reaction to him asking. Something nagged at Levi, though. A feeling of wondering just why the hell Eren was doing this, to begin with. He was usually a good judge of character and Eren didn't seem to fit the mold of willingly sleeping around. He was intense, more than Levi could handle at times, and passionate. It just didn't make sense. Something lied deeper, something more personal that Eren never spoke of.

Levi's racing mind halted when his phone lit up on the table in front of him. Reaching delicately to avoid being too obvious, he swiped it to unlock and peered at the text message on its screen.

*See you tonight? Same time?*

Levi's brows furrowed in confusion, wondering to himself why this continued but he never fought to stop it. With careful hands, Levi simply replied with a resounding, *Yes.*

Eren was ready for his day to be done.

He had finished changing into his more casual clothes, dark jeans and a heavy blue long sleeve, slinging a backpack over his shoulder as he made his way to leave. The night before had consisted of entertaining a middle-aged man and his work associates at a night club that was owned locally. Eren spent the entire night sipping on the same drink, doing his best to remain indifferent. Luckily, he didn't have to sleep with the man. Eren was becoming increasingly grateful for that each time it occurred.

Eren made his way to leave, glancing down at his phone as it chirped a melody in his back pocket. He felt a smile tug on his lips to Levi's reply.

*He's just a client, he'd tell himself. A client who pays me to sleep with him. Who I happen to enjoy sleeping with.*

It sounded wrong inside of Eren's head and he mentally cringed at it. It was as if a little voice residing in the back of his mind was telling him to *keep lying to yourself.*

"Eren?"

Eren pivoted and turned to see a woman with short blond hair and black dress slacks with a matching
top. She had her arms crossed over her chest. "Do you have a minute?"

Her name was Nanaba, one of the founders of Long Lasting Memories. Ultimately, his boss. Eren felt a strange twinge inside of his stomach but he nodded anyway. "Sure."

They made their way into her office, a large and dull room of whites and a simple desk and chairs. Eren realized he had only been in here one other time and that was when he originally started here.

"Please, sit."

So he sat.

Nanaba sat at her desk, placing her hands on the bottom of her chin. She sighed quietly. "Something has been brought to my attention, quite a while ago actually, and I tried what I could to handle it myself."

Eren was leaning forward in his chair now, emerald eyes swimming with confusion. "I don't understand..."

Nanaba moved to type a bit on her desk top before turning the screen toward him. "Nile Dok, do you remember him?"

On the screen in front of Eren, a picture of the very man was there. Eren's eyebrows shot up but he found himself nodding. "Yeah... he was my client a few months back. In November, I think."

He felt hesitant and dreadful.

"He's filing a complaint against you. He's claiming you assaulted him," she said uneasily.

Eren didn't even try to hide his outrage. "Are you kidding me? That rat bastard assaulted me!"

She gave him an almost sympathetic smile. "Why didn't you report it in, Eren? I know that had been gone over at your orientation."
I handled it, he wanted to say. Just as he had explained to Annie that night at her place. *Whenever people got too pushy with me, I usually was able to put them in their place without it going too far. Nile just... didn't get the message.* Eren recalled being called a whore and the pain he felt bloom in his heart from the word. Nile was all in all a downright *scumbag* for even trying to pin this all on him--

"I... thought it would be better if I handled it myself. Which I did," Eren explained carefully.

Nanaba tilted her head. "He's also taken pictures of the bruises he had on his ribs. Did you retain any injuries?"

It was a lost cause, Eren realized. He only had a bump on the back of his head from when Nile had grabbed him and threw his back on the couch. Other than that, he had absolutely no proof other than his word. Eren felt himself start to grind his teeth in both frustration and anger.

"I'm telling you, he assaulted me. Things were okay in the beginning and he just... I don't know, started getting really aggressive very quickly. I first tried to calm him down, telling him there was no rush. But he just kept going and he eventually threw me so hard against the couch, my head hit the arm rest. He started calling me names and ripping my shirt open. I kicked him off of me and left after that."

His words came out in a rush as if he couldn't explain himself any faster. There was a momentary silence.

"I believe you," Nanaba said finally.

Eren let out the breath he was holding. "Thank you, you have no idea how much--"

"You're misunderstanding; I do believe you, Eren. Your clients have nothing but good things to say about you. You work hard and I can tell your sincere. But without proof you actually *were* assaulted, I have to allow the complaint to fall through and Nile will be allowed to hire from us again. I have my boss riding me about this too."

Eren was standing up now. "I... please, *I need this job*. I can't get fired because of some ass--"
"I'm not firing you. But this will be in your file. I'm telling you right now, in the future, you have to tell me if this happens again. File an actual complaint on paper and allow me to process it. I know you're resilient, but as a company, we take the safety of both our employees and clients very seriously, Eren."

Eren felt relief and burning rage at the same time, but he found himself swallowing the lump in his throat and nodding. "Alright, I will. I promise."

When Eren had left Nanaba's office and entered the outside of the building, he didn't even wait for the coast to be clear before he opened his mouth and let out a frustrated cry.

If I ever see that son of a bitch again, I swear I'll show him the meaning of fucking assault--

"You're tense, brat," a deep voice murmured against his skin.

Eren opened his eyes, blinking and staring down at Levi. The raven-haired man was currently dragging his lips down Eren's chest and stomach, noticing the aura of anger around him. Levi had noticed it the second Eren entered his apartment. "I'm not," the brunette countered weakly.

"You are," Levi argued. He sat up and stared at Eren. "More so than usual."

Eren tried to not let his eyes linger on Levi's well-defined chest, so he dragged them away and sat up himself. Even that wasn't enough to distract him. "I'm sorry," he found himself saying. "I should probably just go home."

Levi was sitting fully on the bed now, peering at Eren with a questionable gaze. He sucked at figuring out how to approach the younger man. "You don't have to leave just because neither of us didn't come. It's like you think I'm going to kick your ass out the door myself."

Eren regarded Levi with a sidelong glance but didn't respond. It made Levi sigh.

"You want to talk about it?"
"I probably shouldn't," Eren thought to himself. But his mouth started opening anyway. "Just... something happened at work. I'm pretty pissed off about it," he admitted.

"Well, that's evident."

When Eren looked at Levi again, he was looking at him almost expectantly. Eren finally caved. "Okay, some asshole that got a little too rough with me a few months back decided to be an arrogant prick and filed an assault complaint against me."

Eren missed when Levi's jaw clenched, his eyes tightening into a glare. "Is that so?"

The words came out cold, colder than anything Eren had ever heard Levi say. He felt a chill run down his spine from the words alone. But Levi was still looking at him, giving him an opening to continue. "I handled it," Eren repeated. "Kicked him off of me and left. My boss grilled me for never reporting it. I'm just afraid..." He let out a soft breath. "I can't lose this job. If I lose it, I'll..."

Levi's expression had changed and he moved to sit beside Eren on the bed. Levi's feet just barely touched the floor beside Eren's. "I know the first time I asked you, you borderline raged like hell. But I'm still wondering why you do this for a living, you just don't seem like the type to..." Levi fumbled with his words, trying to hardest to be understanding.

"Sleep around?" Eren supplied.

Levi shrugged.

"I..." ...Would it really hurt to tell him? It's not like you've got anybody else to talk to about this. Might get some weight off my chest.

There was a silence that hung over them and Levi was about to give up on ever getting Eren to tell him the truth.

"My mom is sick," Eren murmured. Levi's sharp eyes turned back to the brunette; surprise evident on their features. "Very sick. Brain cancer. It's at its final stage now and between radiation and chemotherapy, it's not helping with anything. It's almost as if it's making it worse."
Levi didn't even need more information to finally put the pieces of the puzzle together. "I'm sorry," the shorter man said sincerely.

"Starting last year, they started a surgical trial of medicine to help stop the progression of the tumor. The window for it is only open for a certain amount of time and our insurance didn't cover anything for it. I..." Eren looked away, dark hair covering the side of his face. He swallowed. "My friend told me about the escort agency, and at first I wasn't going to do it. How could I? But when I watched my mom stumble on her feet from the lack of oxygen to her brain, I couldn't not take the job. The money was too good for me to turn it down."

When the uncomfortable silence was back, Eren glanced back at Levi to see what his reaction would be. Eren had never openly told anybody any of this before and it was a great relief but also brought on mental exhaustion for him.

"You're really something else, kid. You know that?"

For a brief moment, Eren thought he saw a warmness in Levi's eyes but it could have been a trick of the dim lighting. "What?"

"You're doing something selfless for your family's sake, I respect that. Not too many people out there that would be as sacrificing or caring as that," Levi continued.

Eren didn't know why, but he fought back tears. It felt so good to not be looked down for what he was doing. For someone to understand that this was the only way to help his family without having to ask help from others. Eren refused to take the last fighting chance his mother had away due to his own insecurities. Isn't that what family was for?

Without thinking, Eren turned his head and placed his lips against Levi's.

Levi responded by placing a hand on the side of Eren's face, pulling them away from each other. "You don't have to, you know. It's fine if you just want to talk. We don't have to fuck every single time we see each other."

_We don't?_ Eren wanted to say out loud. But found himself instead saying: "And if I want to?"

Eren didn't give Levi a chance to respond when he claimed his mouth again. Immediately, Levi
brought the younger man into the same position he was in earlier. His tongue caressed Eren's as his hands moved to unbble his jeans. Eren lifted his hips and moaned quietly against Levi's mouth, allowing his jeans to be discarded to the floor. Eren leaned forward, never breaking contact from the raven's lips and began undoing the others belt as well. With a satisfied groan from Levi, their clothes were finally removed and the heat of their skin met.

Eren couldn't seem to tear his mouth away from Levi's, their kiss deepening and intensifying as hands roamed all over each other's bodies. Eren's skin burned in each place Levi's hands had been. The scorch of his touch causing Eren to breathe heavily through his nose. His hands didn't stop moving, bracing against Levi's shoulders and then lightly dragging down his back. Levi arched at the faint touches and Eren began to note that it seemed to be a pleasant spot that Levi enjoyed. When Eren decided to drag his nails down instead of just his finger tips, Levi growled and pulled away from Eren's mouth.

Levi muttered an explicit 'fuck' before hastily reaching over to the bedside nightstand. His movements were jerky and uncoordinated as he coated his fingers with lotion, brushing them against Eren's backside while keeping hazy eyes on the brunette. Eren couldn't keep his eyes open once Levi started to work him, his mouth parting in a gasp as talented fingers moved.

"Relax," Levi grunted.

"Trying," Eren gasped back.

Eren hadn't truly realized how much the tension of today was affecting his body and he cursed himself for it. He wanted this, he knew it and wasn't going to deny it. But damn the stress in his body right now.

The sensations of Levi working him open were accompanied by something else entirely, a wet warmth that spread over his erection. Eren brought a fist to his mouth and bit down to stop the scream that tore from his throat. While using his fingers, Levi simultaneously placed his mouth on the other man's erection.

"S-How," Eren hissed as the pressure increased, draining all the knots and dreadful feelings out of Eren's body and replacing it with a hazing pleasure that went from his belly and to his toes. His eyes briefly opened and glanced at the other man, his stomach coiling just at the sight alone. "Levi, if you don't stop I'll--"

Levi pulled back abruptly at that, releasing Eren's cock and withdrawing his fingers. Eren watched
through his haze as Levi coated his erection with lotion and reached for Eren's hands, pinning them above his head and pressing into him with ease. Levi gave Eren a moment to adjust and began thrusting into him slowly at first. The pressure and pleasure that coursed through him were more than Eren could take. It always seemed Levi was the only person that heightened his senses this way. Eren's toes curled, his back arched and he fought against the restraint Levi placed on his wrists.

Eren could drink in the sight again and again and it never failed to arouse him further. It snapped any control he'd try to have and just fully found himself submitting to the feeling of Levi inside of him. Submitting to the penetrating gaze of the older man as he locked eyes with his while he thrust sharply and hit that one spot that had Eren seeing white.

Eren's release ripped through him without Levi even touching him again, his lungs faltering to give him air to even cry out.

Levi moved his hands from Eren's wrists and placing them against his face, dragging his mouth against his own as he continued to thrust with a few more powerful snaps of his hips. He groaned lowly into Eren's mouth as his released crashed through him, his tongue dancing with the others in an attempt to ground the both of them back to reality. Levi pulled back slowly, withdrawing from Eren's body and releasing his face from his hands. He fell to the other side of the bed, his breathing just as loud and piercing as Eren's.

"Fuck," was all Levi was able to say.

Eren swallowed down a smile, nodding his head. "Yeah."

It was always the same afterward, Eren noted, as his eyes refused to leave their place of staring above. There always was something left unsaid in the end.

Eren always left in the middle of the night, Levi noted. The times Eren assumed Levi was asleep when the raven-haired man was keenly aware of the departure of the other. Even after the countless times, they'd been together, Levi had to remind himself the same thing over and over again.

*It's all about the money.*

And now Levi knew exactly why that had been.
His always placed the check for Eren in the same spot on the night table and Eren always made sure to leave with it. Levi wasn't sure if it was a figment of his imagination or a trick of the light, but this time when Eren went to reach for it, he was sure there was hesitation in his movements.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm pretty upset. I had this chapter written out nearly to the end and my computer decided to just randomly black screen on me while i was typing. Everything got erased. And I didn't have it all saved. UGH!

So... again, your support is SO incredible. I am so happy so many of you are enjoying the progression of the story! Somebody had asked how many chapters this would be... I wanna say between 16 to 20. But we shall see!

The denial of feels is strong with these two.

Thanks again for the love all! Feel free to hit that little heart button or drop a line! See you all next chapter and I hope you all enjoyed your Thanksgiving!
He stared at the pieces of paper that littered the inside drawer to his nightstand, his fingers reaching to delicately pick up one of the pieces. He ran a thumb over the name of the person who issued the personal check.

_Levi Ackerman._

Eren sat on his bed with only the dim light from the cloudy morning pouring through his window, his ocean gaze locked onto the numbers that were written on the check. This time, for one thousand dollars. After their first initial meeting, Eren had felt increasingly uncomfortable with the amount Levi would offer him for his company. He felt like he was robbing the man, although, Levi had assured him money was no problem in his case. Still... it felt outrageous. Especially since Eren was doing this under the nose of Long Lasting Memories.

Still... even a thousand dollars was quite high in Eren's case.

He didn't just have one of the checks, he had quite a few of them stowed away. He felt something eating away at his stomach at the thought of cashing them, even though he absolutely knew he needed to. For his mother's sake, personal feelings aside, Eren knew what he had to do.

So why did he hesitate?

Eren sighed and placed his face against his hands. "What am I doing...?" he muttered to himself in dismay.

He needed to deposit the checks today as well as visit the hospital in regard to the finances related to his mother's surgery. He was already aware of the cost, nearly five hundred thousand along with in and out patient care. The cost is what set him into such a desperate panic that he took the job with Annie. He needed to know for certain where he and Mikasa stood with what they've been able to contribute so far. Mikasa was persistently trying to go with him while he attended to all of this but needed to ensure she didn't see what he had paid into it so far.

Eren sat up from the bed and collected the checks, both from Levi and several other clients and grabbed his thick hooded sweater. He threw it over his head and ran a hand through his hair in an
attempt to calm it as he left his room. Classes were out for a mid-winter break and it gave Eren a chance to get his affairs in order.

"Good morning," Carla had greeted as Eren made his way through the den and into the kitchen. She was wearing a chocolate-colored dress that reached around her ankles, something loss fitting and comfortable, and her hair was up today. Eren noted the dark circles under her eyes but otherwise was standing without any swaying. She turned toward Eren and offered a small smile. "Are you hungry? I could make you something," she said. Mikasa was cleaning dishes next to her at the sink, making Eren realize he may have slept in later than he wanted to.

Eren shook his head and walked over to kiss her on the cheek. "I'm fine," he assured her. "How're you feeling? You had an okay night last night?"

"I feel good today," Carla said with a brighter smile. "Me and Mikasa were thinking of using the gift certificates you got us for Christmas and having a spa day."

"Sounds festive," Eren approved with a grin.

"We could do that another day if you'd like the three of us to do something together," Carla said. "It's so rare to see you home, it's refreshing actually."

Mikasa had briefly turned her head during the conversation and Eren could see she wanted to say something. He prayed to God she wouldn't. She was always good at pointing things out even against Eren's knowledge.

"I actually have a few errands to run today. Plus, I'm going to go talk to Rico in financing at the hospital to see where we stand with that," the brunette explained as he helped himself to the coffee maker on the counter. He made himself a small cup of coffee and brought the mug to his lips with satisfaction.

Mikasa stopped abruptly with the dish washing, drying her hands on the towel. "I thought I told you I'd go with you to do that."

Carla's smile faltered a bit. "We could all go, Eren. Seeing that this is in regards to my health, maybe it's best if I go with you."
No, no, I can't have these two coming with me. Rico might let something slip on how much has been paid already.

Eren smiled sheepishly, trying to play off his anxiety. "Really, it's fine. That'd mean I'd have to drag you two around while I run around the city and I think that'd be too much for you, Mom."

Eren needed to leave while he still had a chance. Knowing Mikasa, she'd drop everything right then and there and follow him out the damn door.

"Eren, I think it'd be better if I went with y--"

Eren grabbed his wallet and pressed a hand to his pocket to assure himself the checks were still in place there. "It's not a big deal, Mikasa. You two go enjoy your spa day. You both deserve it," he wiggled his hands toward the two of them, making his mother smile a bit brighter again. "Get pampered."

Eren walked over and kissed his mother on the cheek while moving to give Mikasa a half hug before she could protest further. "I'll see you guys tonight."

He made one hell of a retreat out of the front door, practically tripping on his feet as he went down the front steps and into the cold of the late morning.

Eren sighed and scrolled through his phone as he waited impatiently at the financing department of the hospital. He brought his head briefly and glanced around the all white and sterile room. Being here brought back nothing but terrible memories, he realized. He hoped he'd have some good memories to balance it out soon. Specifically, good memories of his mother being able to live without this cancer. His father had also passed on in this hospital and just sitting in there made his stomach ache.

Eren stared back at his phone, scrolling through his text messages and realizing he had a few from Mikasa and Armin. Mikasa was specifically voicing how upset she was that he had made these plans without her and Armin asking if he'd like to meet up as a group tonight. Eren responded promptly to both of them; apologizing to his sister and telling Armin yes to his request. It had been quite a while since he was last out with his friends. Maybe a distraction from everything that had been happening would do him some good.

Speaking of distractions, Eren's heart hammered in his chest when he realized there had been an unopened text from Levi the night before. Or to six in the morning, to be exact. Quickly opening it, it
Eren's brows knitted together as he kept his gaze locked on the screen, trying to decipher the mixed signals he was getting from this man. Was he suggesting that he wanted him there longer?

Before he had a chance to come up with a response that would make any sense, a voice cut through his thoughts.

"Mr. Yeager?"

Eren tore his gaze away from his phone and his head shot up. "Yes?"

A woman with polished silver hair and glasses stood with a clipboard, inclining her head. "Right this way," she said a bit more casually. Rico had always been the person he spoke to in regards to billing. She had walked him through step by step since his mother's first diagnoses. He was very happy he continued to meet with her and not a random stranger each time.

They made their way down a hallway within the hospital and into her office. "Sorry for the wait, we're a bit busier than usual."

"I bet," Eren responded and took a seat. There was a simple two chairs, a desk with a computer and a few decorative plants on either side of the wall. A few pictures were hanging up and some personal pictures were on Rico's desk.

"So," she began while pulling his mother's information on the computer. "Your mother is faring well at the moment? Medication and treatments going still the same?"

"Yes and yes, so far. I'm just hoping we're getting close to reaching out goal. I don't know how long the good will last with this."

Rico glanced at Eren shortly and nodded. "I understand, Eren. It'll take a minute but I'll let you know exactly where you're at."

Eren was moving hastily in his seat, unable to sit still while Rico continued to type at an alarming
"I know we've already gone over the cost of in and out patient care, the surgery itself, radiology and chemotherapy. Excluding the medications and other necessities. Do you need me to go over them again with you?" she inquired while keeping her eyes on the screen ahead.

"No ma'am, I think I've got that locked in my brain by now."

She nodded. "Alright, Eren. After your most recent transactions, you're looking at a balance of $203,250 dollars. It's dropped quite a bit since that last time I saw you," she noted while finally glancing his way.

I can't believe this... I've only dented half. There are only a few more months before they close the window for this treatment. How the hell am I going to come up with the rest of that?

Noticing Eren's panicked expression, Rico softened her features a bit. "Keep in mind that your mother's insurance will cover part of the cost for this. There are also banks who will work with you for a medical loan or grant."

Eren shook his head. "Yeah, only 10% of its cost and none of the banks within a fifty-mile radius will approve me." He leaned and brought his face into his hands, breathing in slowly.

"I am sorry, Eren. I know this doesn't seem fair."

"Of course it's not fair!" Eren suddenly exclaimed, raising his head and standing from his seat. "My mom might die because of something as petty as money! Do you have any idea what I've been going through just to get her this treatment and that's with the high hopes that it actually works!"

This was the second time within two days Eren was standing in someone's office, screaming at them for something that was out of their control. Rico took it in stride though, keeping her face calmly composed and sighing to herself.

"I wish there was more I could do for you and your family, I really do. I have families losing children because their insurance can't cover the costs for their surgeries or treatment, so please know you're not the only one who is suffering because of this." Her sharp eyes were on her as she adjusted her glasses a bit and Eren felt some of the anger deflate at the statement. "I can call around for you and
see if any banks can possibly overlook your previous applications for a loan. Otherwise, there is still a time frame open. You still have six months and you don't know what can happen within that time."

Unless I win the damn lottery, I don't see very much happening. At this rate, I'm going to have to sleep with half of the east coast.

Eren uncurled his fists before his fingertips bled into his palms, sighing and letting his head drop. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be screaming at you. This isn't your fault, Rico. I appreciate everything you do for my family."

"You'd be surprised when I tell you that lacks in comparison to what I deal with on a daily basis, nobody said this job was easy. But," Rico began. "Look at the money you've brought in within just a year. You and your sister are really making the impossible possible. Just keep striving toward your goal and I have faith that you will. I'll do what I can on my end."

Eren left Rico's office feeling slightly defeated and it took everything in him not to start screaming in public like he had the day before.

"Eren, slow down."

Mikasa's voice seemed to drift passed him; fizzle in his head as he sat at the usual table inside of their usual bar. After running around the city for a few hours, Eren needed to unwind. Admittedly, he hadn't been around very many friends in the past few weeks. Between his time with Levi and his other clients, Eren just couldn't find the time. He missed socializing, he missed the familiar faces of those he trusted.

Sitting next to him was Mikasa, Armin, and Bertolt to her right. Across from them was Jean, Marco, Annie, and Reiner. Surrounding the table, Connie and Sasha pulled up chairs toward whatever spaces were available. Eren couldn't remember the last time they had all come out together and he had to admit it was rather pleasant. If Eren wasn't mistaken, the last time they had all gathered like this, he had talked with Annie about the escort service.

"I'm fine," Eren replied while placing his empty glass on the table. He glared momentarily at his sister, agitated at the thought of being baby-sat. How often did he really let loose?

"It's been so long since we all got to hang out like this," Marco stated while sipping quietly on his drink. Around the table were various appetizers and cocktails. There was a pitcher of beer toward the side where most of them partook in. "How're your classes going, Eren?"
"Great," he replied while reaching to fill up his mug. "But I can't lie and say I'm not enjoying the break."

"I'm surprised you manage your classes and work," Marco continued with a genuine smile. "I have such a hard time keeping up."

Eren smiled against his mug.

"I'm surprised too, given Eren's hours," Mikasa stated matter-of-factly, not even bothering with her beverage. "How have things been at the warehouse?"

Eren almost sputtered on his alcohol, trying to mask his turmoil in a coughing fit.

Bertolt became the savior of the hour. "Things have been hectic since the holidays passed, we've all got our workload cut out for us."

"And thank God we've got Eren around to pick up the slack for this guy," Reiner chimed in, moving to wrap a bulky arm around Bertolt as he stood. Bertolt gave Reiner a flat look, shrugging his arms away.

Eren felt a slight relief filter through his shoulders, nodding in thanks toward to two men across from him. He glanced at Mikasa, who was staring attentively at the two men before she sighed and swirled her drink around. Good, Eren thought. I don't know why she's always so insisting on poking her nose in my business but enough.

"Cut Eren some slack, Mikasa. You both work nearly the same hours." Armin said.

"I know... I just want to make sure he's not overworking himself."

Eren felt his grip tighten on his drink. "If I am overworking myself, there's obviously a good reason. We both have obligations."
"Which you still aren't very open about," Mikasa began to protest.

Eren wanted to blame the alcohol because, in actuality, he was buzzed. Borderline drunk. But his body moved on its own and he stood up abruptly from his seat. Everyone around the table glanced his way questionably but didn't dare say anything.

"I'm stepping outside, I need air."

He retreated and grabbed his jacket, tired of constantly being questioned and analyzed. He heard a few people say his name but he ignored it. His mind was swimming; not as clear and sharp as usual. How much alcohol had he had? He walked through the busy bar and found himself outside in the freezing air. He tugged his jacket closer to his body and shuddered as the breeze bit his skin. He leaned his body against the front of the building and sighed deeply.

_I don't know how much longer I can keep this up._

Eren felt as though there were walls closing in around him, nearly suffocating him. The hand he had been dealt with wasn't fair or an easy one but he took it with as much stride as he could. What he wouldn't give to just forget about it even for a moment.

_Forget..._

His hands started moving on their own, reaching into his jeans pocket and retrieving his phone. His eyes roamed over the text message that Levi had sent him the night before. His head was swimming as he typed out his reply.

'Got home safe, thanks for checking.'

What an incredibly lame response and Eren knew it. He sighed and the cold air reflected from his mouth and into the air, closing his eyes and leaning quietly against the front of the building. When he re-opened them, Eren noticed a few others around him, holding their own drinks and smoking cigarettes. They were laughing and enjoying each others company, one of the younger woman wrapping her arms around what appeared to be her boyfriend. They looked so incredibly in love it made Eren's stomach hurt. He watched them, curious and silent, wondering what it would be like to feel a sense of normalcy like that.
A loud chirping from his hand made Eren stiffen his body straight and he looked back down at his phone again.

'A bit of a delayed response, don't you think? Hardly helpful.'

Eren snorted, a smile playing on his lips without him even realizing it. 'Sorry, I didn't see your message until earlier. Don't be an ass.'

Levi hadn't responded after that, indicating the their conversation was all but over. He found himself soon walking back inside and joining his friends at the table. Most of them were already deep in their own conversations while Eren took a few more sips from his own mug. He knew he probably shouldn't have been drinking anymore but didn't find it in himself to care. He stared lazily outside of the window and caught sight of the couples standing outside again. In all of the chaos of his life, Eren couldn't recall ever having a relationship that even represented the one he was seeing. All soft touches and affectionate gazes; his stomach continued to turn and he silently wondered if it was in jealousy.

His mind made a mental image of one person, but Eren quickly squandered it.

About an hour later, the group had said their goodbyes. It was nearing closing time and Eren couldn't deny he was ready to fall into his bed. Declining the offer to go home with Mikasa, Eren opted to walk home instead. It gave him a chance to sober up a bit and clear his head. As he walked along the dark sidewalks during the quiet night, Eren felt a soft drop of precipitation land against his cheek. He tilted his head upwards and noticed small flurries of snow falling from above. It made Eren smile and he hugged his jacket closer to his body.

Eren had taken his time going home, trying to relieve the tension in his body that had steadily been building since the day before. He knew he'd been vague and distant about the entire affair that had happened earlier at the hospital but he didn't know how else to be. His mother wasn't stupid and his sister was sharp when it came to small details. He didn't know how his family would react if they had ever found out what he did to make the money he was making for financing the surgery. Unlike Levi, he doubted they'd be nearly as accepting.

When Levi crept into his thoughts again, Eren brought his jacket up a bit to cover his lips and cheeks. He felt a hot blush form even with the snow littering the ground. Each day and with each time the two of them had seen each other, Eren's feelings continue to manifest into something he wasn't familiar with. He wanted to say it was mere infatuation but lying to himself didn't help the situation any. There was more to it than that and Eren hated himself for not understanding it. He had never had a relationship with a client like this before and he couldn't lie and say it didn't frighten and exhilarate him at the same time.
The snow had covered a significant amount of the streets and sidewalks by the time Eren was standing in front of his house, coating everything around him with a soft white. As he approached the front porch, his phone had beeped quietly in his coat pocket. Arching a brow, he reached inside and retrieved it.

'What're your plans tomorrow?'

Eren tilted his head and quietly pondered the question. Aside from meeting a client for lunch tomorrow, Eren was open.

'I'm free tomorrow night.'

Eren noticed the most of the lights in his house were off, indicating that Mikasa wasn't home yet. She may have ended up hanging out with a few of the girls before coming home, seeing as today was one of her few days off. The time on his phone had read 9:12 pm. It was still fairly early, he realized. He knew his mother was next door at Hanne's house again which meant he was actually alone. He took a seat on the rocking chair on the porch, enjoying the dull chill around him provided from the snowfall. His heart was hammering in his chest as he waiting for Levi to reply.

'Good. I'm taking you out then.'

Eren's fingers were quick to reply.

'Is it for work? Personal? I want to make sure I wear something appropriate.'

Levi's reply hadn't come in as quickly as the rest of them had so with a sigh, Eren stood up and unlocked the front door and went inside. He stripped his jacket off and turned on the lights. He still felt slightly light-headed feeling and he figured coffee would help remedy his buzz before anybody came home. Preparing a quick cup for himself of instant coffee, Eren went into his room and closed the door with a soft click. He undressed and replaced his casual clothes with a pair of draw-string sweatpants and a loose shirt. He ran a nervous hand through his hair when his phone had lit up from where he tossed it on the bed.

'Neither. This is me asking you out on a date, brat.'
Eren's eyes widened at Levi's, staring with a creeping heat that traveled from his neck to his face. He steadied himself and sat down on the bed, swallowing deeply. *Asking me out... on a date? An actual date and not hiring me for sex?*

Eren realized with much embarrassment that he had never been asked out before and he *certainly* had never been asked out by a client. Most of them were quick to discard him shortly after their encounters which is *why* Eren had always made it a point to leave shortly after them. He was well sought after for his services but *not* after. Eren felt that unfamiliar clenching in his stomach again and he knew for certain it wasn't from the alcohol.

He didn't know how to reply. He didn't know what to *do*. Did this mean that Levi... that he could've possibly had *feelings* for him? Eren's mind recalled their last time together, the understanding Levi had shown him and the way his eyes bored into his. The way his touches sent jolts through his body and the way Eren always seemed to crave *more* and *more*. Levi didn't look at him the way his other clients had; he looked at him like a human being and not an object to be used.

This wasn't normal-- this wasn't part of the plan. The realization had felt like a slap in Eren's face.

His fingers moved on their own and he *knew* now why--

'What time?'

Eren fell against his unkept bed, legs dangling toward the floor with his phone against his racing chest. He placed his hands against his face and bit back a frustrated whine.

*I'm falling for Levi Ackerman.*

Chapter End Notes

Please know this wasn't a filler chapter, but I did need to get this information out as there is actually a plot to this story.

These two and their feels, I swear to God.

We've reached 300 kudos, omg, thank you so much! We are getting closer and closer to my favorite parts of the story. The next chapter will be a wild ride!

As always, thanks again and please feel free to hit that little heart button or drop a line!
I'm also on tumblr.
damagedworth.tumblr.com and Woven Strings is tagged as #wovenstrings
Cheers and see you next chapter! :)
Chapter Summary

Levi takes Eren out of their 'first' date but disruptions are never far away.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This was supposed to be a simple lunch in, nothing more.

But nothing ever went as planned, especially when a pair of hungry lips were devouring his, needy and demanding.

Eren did his best to keep up, to stay steady and remind himself this is what he had to do. With each client, it was a painful reminder. This is what he was forced to choose. This is what he had chosen.

The man currently pushing him against the far wall of the hotel suite was a well known business man who dabbled in stocks. Eren had remembered meeting him one time before but it hadn't led to a sexual encounter. His build was much larger than his own and Eren had noticed more than once the wedding ring that adorned his left hand. He wondered if this person's significant other knew he was sleeping around. It wasn't Eren's job to wonder or be concerned, but it still felt wrong each time. His hair was dirty blonde, slicked back and he wore expensive suits and an overpowering cologne. It was all Eren was smelling and it gave him a dull headache. He wasn't bad to look at, he had a decent appeal to him. But it was nothing in comparison to... well--

_Dammit, stop thinking about it._

Andrew was his name, if Eren had remembered correctly. Not that it really mattered. His money was all Eren was concerned about and he made sure his body remembered that as he was dragged toward the bed on the opposite side of the room. The older man hadn't said much other than an occasional grunt or a quick comment about how good it felt to be above him the way he currently was. Eren felt his clothes being tugged away, ripping off of his body and he was being pressed against the mattress. As Andrew stripped, Eren had felt an overwhelming sense of suddenly being trapped.

_What the hell is wrong with me?_
Eren found himself on his stomach after a few moments with the side of his face pressing against the pillow beneath him. The comforter smelled of cheap laundry soap and that horrific smelling cologne. He did his best to relax, to remind himself again that he had done this so many times now, but his body wasn't listening to him. The man's hands against his backside felt so rough, so calloused and when he was hastily preparing him, Eren closed his eyes and imagined delicate hands tracing along his hipbones.

*Levi.*

Eren's mind filtered those thoughts; they were surging through him and consuming him. The weight that pressed against him as heat slid into his body wasn't what he was familiar with anymore. Eren never felt so constricted, so cornered the way he felt now. He continued to keep his eyes closed and he allowed himself to remember the way Levi would gently put pressure in *just* the right areas, a deep voice breathing next to his ear as he'd ask, "Here?" or "Like this?"

*Levi.*

The was something so urgent and also so tentative about the way Levi touched him. It had started out rocky at first; borderline clumsy in fact. But as the months went by, it was almost as if Levi's body became attuned with Eren's. Knew exactly what he wanted and where he wanted it. This person above him now, thrusting haphazardly and almost aggressively into his body, wasn't helping Eren reach his point of completion. He was simply looking to absorb in his own release and probably could give two shits about what he was feeling. Levi made it a mission to have Eren fall apart in his arms. Eren imagined the way Levi would bite his ear gently when he knew he was reaching his point of no return, steadily ordering in a quiet hush, "Come for me, *Eren.*"

*Levi.*

With those thoughts, Eren's release accompanied them. He had nearly shouted Levi's name and thankfully bit on his lip to retrieve the name before it tumbled from his mouth.

Andrew had released with a groan that was louder than Eren had expected, nails digging into his backside and more than likely leaving bruises behind. It took him a few moments before Eren felt him withdraw from his body and released him from the position he was trapped in. He didn't bother helping Eren clean up and even truly acknowledge him as he stood up and steadied himself.

"I'm going to take a shower," he started as he retrieved his clothes from the floor. "The check is on the counter."
That was it.

Eren was still laying on the bed, breathing erratic and heart racing. He suddenly felt so dirty and wanted nothing more than to removed the stench of the man who had just fucked him into the mattress like some cheap whore.

Whore.

Is that what I am? Is that what they all see me as?

Eren sat up on the bed slowly and finally willed his body to move. He inched toward the foot of it, bending down to gather his own clothes. He looked around the hotel room and found some tissues on one of the night tables. He did the best he could to remove all traces of Andrew from his body. He felt an overwhelming desire to shower and scrub himself raw until his skin was peeling. This filth, this sudden disgust; it was evident all over him. He dressed in silence and made his way to leave. As he approached the door, he noticed the check sitting on the counter. He grabbed it and examined it, a deeper more repressed part of him wondering why his soul suddenly felt so hollow.

Levi... he never looked at me that way. Now he wants to actually spend time with me. Not as an obligation, but because he wants to and here I am letting someone fuck me like I'm the last man on earth.

Eren hadn't realized it until a wet spot appeared on the check in his hands. His eyes widened and he brought a hand up to his cheek, feeling another unshed tear making its way down.

Levi had done his research.

Well, he spent a majority of his work day doing his research.

He didn't want appear completely and utterly ignorant to what a date entailed, so Google was his friend. Probably the only one he had but still-- it did have it's perks. Levi was used to fine dining, he was used to busy restaurants and heavy traffic bars. He had a feeling that even though Eren's job pretty had him running in a million different directions, he didn't want to sit in some stuffed up restaurant filled with a bunch of stuck up pricks. So after a few fruitless hours of looking up potential places to go, Levi had a stroke of luck.
Eren's personality was carefree, spontaneous and he wanted to make sure he kept that in mind while he planned.

Levi's gray eyes wandered toward the work load on his desk and he sighed, gathering it up and placing it in his briefcase. He was planning on leaving early that day to avoid traffic and get himself ready in the comfort of his apartment. He wanted to give himself time to gather his thoughts because all his mind seemed to occupy these days was a certain bright-eyed, stubborn little shit that didn't seem to want to go away.

Levi was tired of not knowing where they stood-- tired of not knowing if these feelings were misplaced and tired of not knowing whether Eren actually had feelings for him or if he really did just look at him as a potential client.

They'd created a mess, he realized.

The last time he had seen Eren, the younger man surprised him by opening a bit of his heart to him. Levi generally didn't bother when it came to what others were feeling. He had enough of that shit to deal with himself. But when Eren waltzed into his life, unprepared and unexpectedly, he splashed color into Levi's gray world. He started reaching deep into Levi's heart and tugging on the strings of it-- teasing him and testing him. Eren probably hadn't even realized what he had done, but Levi surely felt it.

And he was able to admit to himself that he had never felt that before.

He wanted to know more about Eren. He wanted to know about his aspirations and his dreams. He wanted to know more. Eren had wormed his way and infected him like a cancerous tumor and Levi tried in the beginning to ignore it-- to write it down as a mere want of the man's body and nothing else. But something about Eren made him suddenly feel alive.

And he couldn't lie and say he didn't quite enjoy that.

Shutting down his computer for the rest of the afternoon, Levi gathered his belongings and began making his way to leave. As he stood up, he heard a surprised noise from the other side of his office and noticed Hange standing there with an incredulous look on their face.

"The fuck do you want?"
"Levi... you're, well, you were... you know," they stammered, which sort of scared Levi.

"Just fucking spit it out already, holy shit," Levi said, exasperated.

Hange hid a smirk behind their hand. "I'm pretty sure I just caught you smiling."

Levi's brows furrowed. "Piss off, shitty glasses. Like I'd have any reason to smile in this hellhole."

Of course, he hadn't realized he was smiling, but he sure as shit wasn't going to give Hange that satisfaction. *For fuck's sake, I'm turning into a sappy imbecile.*

"Pff, you're right. I guess it was a trick of the light, huh?" Levi shot Hange a hell of a warning glare, but they didn't seem to notice. "Speaking of which, Erwin wanted me to remind you that we have a meeting tonight at 6."

"He doesn't need to send you down here to remind me," Levi said as he made his way passed Hange. "Besides, I have plans tonight. He can either re-schedule or have the meeting without me."

Hange tilted their head. "You... have plans?"

Levi stopped walking abruptly, sighing loudly. "Yes, plans. You know, that thing people do every now and then when they have a fucking life. Plans."

Hange let out a roar of laughter. "Oh Levi, you're too much! Would this have anything to do with that gorgeous little morsel you've been bringing around lately?"

Levi was already turning to leave, letting out a scoff as he did. "Goodbye, Hange."

As Levi left, Hange adjusted their glasses and leaned against the door frame to Levi's office. "I love it when I'm right," they song-sang.

---

Eren ransacked his closet, hastily making his way through his clothes. It's not as though he hadn't done this several times over, he knew at this point how to dress for any occasion that was thrown his way. But tonight was different, everything about tonight was *so different.*
This wasn't a client, well, it sort of was. But tonight he wasn't.

This was a date.

A date.

Dammit.

Eren was mortified with the realization that he didn't know what the hell to wear. Levi had vaguely texted him 'casual but not too casual', so that left much to Eren's imagination on what the hell he should wear. Button up? Too much. He pushed several hangers aside. These pants? No, too casual. Son of a bitch, he felt his blood pressure rising just going through his attire. He couldn't imagine what his heart would do once he was face to face with that man that was suddenly crawling into his brain like a damn insect.

Eren huffed a breath of frustration and ran a hand through his hair.

_He won't even tell me where we're going... so it's not helping me much. I... dammit, I can't believe I'm doing this--_

"Mikasa!" he shouted suddenly.

His sister was in his room within seconds, placing a strand of hair behind her ears as she walked in. She was dressed in her lounge around pajama's, off for the night and ready to relax. "What's wrong?" she immediately started.

"Nothing!" Eren held his hands up. "Nothing... just, ugh, I don't know what else to do!"

Mikasa strode in quietly. "Maybe try to start by telling me what you're doing?"

Eren hesitated for a second because he knew his sister; she was insistent in the worst ways. But tonight... it was important and dammit he needed another opinion. "I'm meeting a friend tonight for
dinner... and I sort of don't know what to wear."

As he explained this, he rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. He peered up toward his sister and waited for some sort of response. She stood next to him with a stoic expression and for a moment Eren felt an increasing amount of anxiety. Maybe this was a bad idea. She was undoubtedly going to ask question and insist he doesn't go out because that's just how she was--

But Eren was surprised when Mikasa laughed. A light, breathy sound he hadn't heard in so long.

"You're hopeless," she stated as she gently pushed Eren aside. "How about you tell me where you're going."

"Not a damn clue," Eren muttered. "I was told casual but not too casual."

"Hmm..." Mikasa hummed while sorting through Eren's closet. "Not this and definitely not-- where'd you get this hideous thing? Too dressy..."

Mikasa held up a shirt that Eren was sure he hadn't seen since high school. "Who wears this?"

"Ew," Eren said shortly. "Take that with you and throw it in the garbage. God."

He continued watching impatiently for what felt like hours before Mikasa let out a breath of approval. "This is nice... It compliments your skin tone and eyes."

Mikasa held up a deep green short sleeve shirt. It had a few indentations along the corners of the material. "You could wear a light jacket over it since it's so cold outside. I think if you wear this with a nice pair of jeans, you'll be set."

Eren was a bit stunned by his sister's willingness to help him. He was surprised she wasn't bombarding him with questions. "I... yeah, that'll work. I can do that." He turned to Mikasa as she continued to stare at him.

"Is this really just you meeting up with a friend? You look too frustrated for something as simple as that."
"You know I don't go out much," Eren stated while he moved to his drawers to find a decent pair of jeans. "I want to look nice. Not so hard to believe, is it?" God, he felt like he was explaining to his own mother.

Eren stood up fluidly from where he was crouched in front of the dresser, giving Mikasa a flat look. Mikasa sighed and returned the look right back to Eren.

"I just worry about you," she started. Eren felt a sigh roll from his mouth. "You've been so busy and so distant... I can't help but worry sometimes. You're my family, after all."

Eren knew this very well. He knew Mikasa always meant well and she had a good heart. They had endured so much together in the course of a few years and she may or may not have realized he leaned on her just as heavily as she leaned on him. But she also needed to understand that their circumstances had led to all of this. This... life they were living. He wished more than anything that he could be honest with her, just to tell her what he was currently feeling. But he couldn't and he knew that. So he plastered on his best smile and gave Mikasa a playful shove.

"Try not worry so much. I'm fine and everything else is fine," he started. Mikasa smiled timidly at Eren's playful tone. He had become good at feigning how he really felt. "Now let me get dressed, I don't wanna be late."

Mikasa nodded quietly and made her way out of Eren's room. As she was leaving, Eren could see her retreating body from the mirror in front of him. "Mika?"

His sister stopped and glanced over her shoulder. Their gazes caught in the mirror Eren stood in front of and he smiled. "Thanks."

He felt a flood of relief when Mikasa left the room smiling.

Nightlife in New York was always fascinating to Eren, the streets always bustling and the noise always buzzing. He had grown used to it within the years he and his family had lived here. As he made his way through busy sidewalks and icy concrete his eyes lingered and scanned around him. He was looking for a restaurant with a name he didn't quite understand. Eren felt his stomach clenching and twisting at the thought of where his feet were currently taking him.
Eren had opted to find his own way instead of having Levi pick him up at his house. He was positive by now Levi was aware of the reason why but the request wasn't something the other man easier accepted. With careful persuasion, Eren was able to finally convince Levi to just meet him at their place of gathering. Eren loved surprises, but dammit, this was bothering him. He wore a heavier coat over the attire his sister had helped him pick out. The chill was strong in the air but Eren felt an unfamiliar warmth spreading through his chest among the tightening of anxiety. All his mind was registering was date. Date date date.

With Levi Ackerman, of all people.

Thinking back to that moment they had met months before, Eren had never anticipated this. It made him question his own ability to make decisions.

He wanted to ask Levi why. He needed to know why. Eren felt a confusion linger in the back of his mind as he approached a much busier area of the city. There was a long string of several shops and restaurants in the area but a familiar speck of onyx caught his eye. When Eren sharpened his eyes to take in his surroundings, his breath caught.

Levi stood with his arms crossed against his chest, casting his eyes to the side and looking particularly bored. He was a stark contrast against the crowded streets and dammit Eren couldn't help but admire how good the other man looked. His was wearing some of the most casual clothes he had ever seen on him. A black long sleeve shirt and slacks, covered by a lighter jacket to keep him warm. He wore shoes that would shine if he adjusted his stance. He looked... incredible. Eren felt a fluttering inside of his chest that he only seemed to feel whenever he spent time with the raven-haired male standing across from him.

Eren hadn't realized he was just standing there, gaping like an idiot. Levi briefly moved his gaze and it caught with Eren's. They stood in front of a lit up maroon sign that read 'Incaenduim', simply holding each others gazes for a few moments. Eren's mouth couldn't form words suddenly. He had met Levi at so many different places, gone out on some many different occasions but the entire aura that surrounded tonight was just so different from the rest of them. Everything about this night was foreign.

After a few long seconds, Eren felt his surprise intensify when Levi strode toward him. Eren was as still as stone, turquoise eyes meeting stormy ones.

"Was wondering where you'd show," Levi began as he broke the silence. He leaned up and placed his lips against Eren's cheek. "About froze my ass off out here."
At the feel of Levi’s lips, Eren was suddenly grounded back to reality. His head instinctively moved toward those lips, his eyes briefly fluttering closed before snapping back to attention. Now was not the time to lose himself. "Sorry, it took me a little longer to get ready than I thought it would."

Levi pulled back and observed Eren, his eyes roaming over his entire form without shame. Eren felt uncomfortable, wondering if he had under-dressed. Oh God, I probably did. Shit. I'm stupid, stupid--

"You look..." Levi looked unsure for a moment before he continued. "You look good."

If Eren hadn't been mistaken Levi himself looked flustered, even if it was for a brief moment. Deciding to test his own waters, Eren took a small step forward until they were nearly standing chest to chest. "So do you."

If this is a date... then can't I?

Eren felt bold and leaned down slowly, hesitantly. He felt an overwhelming wave of surprise when Levi met his advances, pressing his lips solidly over his in turn. Eren could've sworn time stood still and the crowd around them had faded into a hazy blur. Eren wanted to wrap his arms around the other man, he wanted to pull him flush against him. The desire that coursed through him scared him and luckily, Levi pulled back from their joined lips and regarded Eren through deep eyes.

"We should get inside," he insisted, a tilt in his usual voice.

The inside of Incaenduim was lavishly decorated with reds and golds, high vaulted ceilings that were painted with images of suns and moons of various arts. There were several decorative plants and sunshine yellow flowers along the walls surrounded by several pastels of flames that littered the entire surrounding walls of the entire restaurant. The exterior of the walls had mainly booths while the more inward portion of the area had several large grilling tables. Eren's eyes were wide with wonder as Levi briefly spoke to the hostess leading them more toward the corner of the restaurant.

The place was packed. The octave of noise was rising the further they had walked inside but the atmosphere itself was comfortable. As they strode forward, Eren had noticed several bars that held raw meats, produce and so many other ingredients. The brunettes stomach rumbled rudely and he was so damn grateful it was noisy in there.

"This is amazing," Eren mumbled aloud. His eyes were wandering everywhere, taking in all of the
artwork and the sight of exquisite foods. They were shown to their booth and asked their preferred beverages. Once ordered, Levi had removed his coat and waited for Eren to do the same.

They moved toward the bar first and Eren suddenly felt confused. "Wait... how does this work?"

"You pretty much grab what you want and then we head over there--" Levi pointed his finger toward the grills in the center. "And cook."

"Ourselves?" Eren asked incredulously.

"Better us than some idiot who fucks up your food."

Eren chuckled and followed Levi's lead, piling whatever meat and vegetables he could find. Eren didn't want to appear glutton but the different aromas were hitting his senses and his stomach wasn't helping with the way it was rumbling in urgency. "You've got a point, but didn't someone have to prepare this stuff too?"

"You trying to make me lose my appetite, brat?"

Eren glanced at Levi and noticed there was a knowing smirk on his face and dammit his stomach wasn't eating itself from hunger at that moment.

When they had reached the grilling area, Eren felt nervous. He knew the basics of cooking but he was now cooking in front of Levi of all people. God, he felt like he was reverting back to junior high all over again with this anxiety around someone he particularly enjoyed being around.

"Here," Levi began while handing out a pair of metal tongs. When the raven-haired man noticed Eren making no movement what so ever, he sighed and held his own tongs up. "Watch."

Eren observed Levi tossing a very deep red cut of steak onto the grill and flames surrounded it briefly before it dissolved with a crackling sizzle. He was fascinated with the way Levi adjusted his cookware, cocking his head and watching the meat slowly brown around the edges. He placed a few raw cut vegetables next to it when it seemed to coat enough. "Simple, right?"
"Yeah... right. Okay, got it."

"Why do you look so nervous? I promise you won't set the place ablaze."

"I don't know... I'm admittedly a little clumsy sometimes," Eren stated while he gingerly placed his own tenderloin onto the grill. It hissed when it touched the flat of it.

"You? Really? I'd never had guessed."

Eren shot Levi a playful glare. "Be careful, I have a pair of very sharp metal tongs in my hand."

"Well, what do you know, so do I." Levi held his own up and clicked them together in a threatening manner. "And I may just take one of your pretty eyes out."

"You think my eyes are pretty?" Eren asked teasingly, leaning forward a bit.

Levi scoffed and turned away from him, although there was no malice behind it. "Watch your fucking food before you burn it."

Eren laughed as he turned the meat over with a satisfying sense of pride. This... this was fun. Being here with Levi, standing side by side with him, laughing and gently teasing was fun. Eren hadn't expected this from the older man given the nature Eren had come to know. But there was evidently more to the executive chief than Eren had realized and he felt elated that he was getting to see that side of him. It gave him a sense of peace; a sense of normalcy that he wasn't sure he'd ever felt before. Eren basked in it.

After they had cooked their food to their liking, they returned to their booth. Eren noticed a light beige liquid was sitting by Levi's side while the bottle of casual beer Eren had ordered was by his. When they started eating, Eren wanted to moan at the taste that was hitting his tongue. Dammit, this was delicious. Eren had never considered himself a cook by any means but after Levi had guided him on what seasonings and herbs to use, he was convinced Levi certainly was.

"I take it you like it?"
"God, yes. This is incredible. How have I never been here before?" Eren responded with an enthusiasm he couldn't contain. "What does the name mean?"

"Incaenduim?" Levi asked. Eren nodded, his mouth full. "It means wildfire in Latin. This was a random find a few years ago and I personally know one of the owners."

The air around them shifted onto the lighter side while the two of them conversed over their meals. Levi casually explained the dynamics of running an advertising agency while Eren went into small detail on the artwork that influenced him the most. Aside from his moment of weakness when he spoke about his mother, Eren hadn't really considered opening up his world to Levi. In retrospect, he never really had to when it came to his clients. But again, Eren remembered that this situation was entirely different from any situation they'd had before. Everything surrounding this was different.

Eren observed the way Levi was cutting his steak with precision, careful and almost elegant as he spoke. It made him realize he was hovering over his food like a damn slob. Levi would take his cloth and wipe his mouth between bites and Eren found himself doing the same.

"You're staring, brat."

Was he? Son of a bitch.

"Uh..." Eren failed miserably at speaking and reached for his beer to coax him. "Sorry... I just noticed... well..."

Levi placed his utensils down, tilting his head and waiting.

"You're so... neat."

"Neat?"

"You know, the way you eat."

Levi's eyebrows shot up and Eren immediately regretted his words. How incredibly lame. God, he should know how to think before he spoke at his age. Levi probably thought he was insane.
To Eren's surprise, Levi let out a bark of laughter. A pleasant, short sound that he'd never heard from the man before. In all of their time together and all of their outings, Eren had never brought up that small observation mainly because he had never noticed. They were usually either attending business dinners in which Levi rarely ate anything or they were in the comfort of Levi's apartment. Now with just the two of them, out in a public place and Eren was seeing many things about Levi Ackerman he'd not noticed previously.

It sort of scared him.

"That's a new one," Levi said after a long moment. He took his small glass and brought it to his lips. "Sometimes you can't be too careful."

Eren felt a blush forming on his cheeks and ears and Levi noticed. "Relax, I'm fucking with you."

The brunette brought his beer to his lips and sputtered a bit when he was suddenly drinking too fast. What a stupid thing to say. He wanted to go back in time and kick the crap out of himself. He hadn't noticed when Levi leaned forward, reaching out and rubbing his thumb against the corner of Eren's lip.

"And sometimes you can be too careful," he clarified.

Eren didn't entirely understand what that meant as Levi gently brushed the pad of his thumb against his lower lip, slowly pulling away after a few moments.

"I find it a little funny..." Levi began as he took another small sip from his glass.

"Find what funny?" Eren dared to ask when he found his voice again.

"You act like an entirely different person when our circumstances are meant to be professional, which I'm sure you've learned to adapt after doing this for quite some time. But when I ask you out as just simple people, you're practically vibrating with anxiety." Levi placed his glass down and storm eyes met ocean ones without wavering. "I wanted to take you out not for the sake of dicking around, but for us to get to know each other."
Eren felt speechless, he didn't know what to say to that. But he tried.

"I..." he began slowly. "I want that too. It's just..." Eren briefly cast his gaze toward the side. "I was surprised when you asked me, completely taken off guard. When we met all those months ago I was convinced you were some arrogant dick who could care less about anybody other than himself. But I was wrong and I can admit that. All those rumors, all those articles about you... they were wrong."

Eren snapped his gaze back to Levi. "You're not bitter. You're..."

A chirping noise shrilled disrupted Eren's train of thought. He mentally cursed and fumbled with his phone. Mikasa.

Dammit, I'm busy right now. Horrible timing.

"Sorry," Eren said as he silenced the phone. "I... but I meant what I said."

Levi observed Eren through somewhat narrowed eyes, though they didn't seem to hold any anger or amusement; they looked at Eren with a sense of wonder. "I'd say that's a good start then."

Eren smiled.

The phone inside Eren's pocket started ringing again, causing the brunette to sigh.

"You may want to pick that up," Levi insisted.

Resting his elbow briefly on the table top, Eren brought the phone to his ear. "Mikasa, can this wait? I'm a little busy right now."

"I've been trying to call you for over an hour! Why the hell haven't you been answering your phone?"

Eren hadn't had any missed calls, so he was a bit confused. His heart was racing from the urgency in his sister's voice.
"I... I must not have very good service where I am. What's wrong?"

"I... shit, move out of the way!" Mikasa was screaming loud enough for Levi to even hear. "I was taking a shower and I heard a thump out in the living room when I ran out Carla was having a seizure and there was blood on the floor!"

Eren stood up shakily from the booth and used his hand to steady himself against it. "Why was there blood?"

"Medics are sure she hit her head as she fell but they need to run more tests to make sure. I'm following the ambulance now but she wasn't waking up Eren!"

"What hospital are they taking her to?" Eren shouted frantically, finally losing his composure. "Mikasa, why wasn't she waking up?"

Levi was standing up from his seat, looking at Eren with a small mix of understanding and confusion. Eren gazed at him with wild eyes, completely letting his fear take over.

"They're taking her to Presbyterian Downtown after I explained she needed to be seen by her own doctors. I don't know why she isn't waking up but Eren, you need to get there as soon as you can!"

Eren hung up the phone. "I... I have to go." He was mumbling to himself, hot tears collecting in the corners of his eyes. "My mom... oh fuck, she--"

"Eren."

Eren's eyes shifted to Levi, who was placing a firm hand on his arm. "Breathe," he instructed.

When Eren tried to breathe, he stuttered on a breath.

"How did you get here?" Levi asked.
Eren was hyperventilating and the only thing grounding him was Levi's voice. "I-I walked."

Levi hastily reached for his wallet, throwing a few bills onto the table. He then reached for Eren again, steadying him and leading him outside. "I'll drive you then, I can get you there faster than a cab."

Eren allowed Levi to walk him through the restaurant doors and outside. The brunette was numb the shrilling breeze that greeted him.

Levi drove like a madman.

He was easily shifting through lanes on one of the busiest highways around the city. Eren hadn't paid too much mind to it, his conscious in a hazing fog as he reached for the safety handle. The car was a comfortable sedan, black on it's exterior with beige lining along the seats inside.

Almost twenty minutes and Levi was slowly driving them toward the emergency portion of the main hospital. The parking lot was littered with rows of cars and several different people walking around it. Levi maneuvered his way toward the entry way and pulled the vehicle into park shortly upon arriving.

Eren wasted no time, he jumped out of the car.

He made a mad dash toward the entrance and soon found himself inside, speaking to the front desk in a horribly jumbled mess of speech. "My mom was brought here by ambulance... please, her name is Carla Yeager."

Levi didn't know if he should stay put or get into his car and leave. He stood in the hallway, observing quietly. He watched Eren, seeing the normally tenacious and fiery man wring his hand together and bow his head to push back the effort of crying. Levi's heart cringed for him.

"Eren!"

Levi recognized the two individuals running toward Eren from the following meeting at the cafe, Mikasa, and Armin if he had remembered correctly.
"She's in room 23 on the third floor, come on!"

Mikasa was pulling Eren away from the main desk, practically dragging him before his feet could properly move on their own. The sheer chaos of the situation was all too familiar to Levi.

Eren hadn't looked back.

Levi took this as his sign to leave.

As he made his way back toward the car, the sound of echoing footsteps halted his thoughts.

"Levi!"

Levi turned, taken aback. Within a fleeting moment, he felt his slim frame being pressed against his own car. It took him several seconds to comprehend the blur that had just attacked him and realized it was Eren. He had his arms wrapped around him like a lifeline, smothering him in the most comfortable way.

"Thank you," Eren murmured against the skin of his neck.

Levi couldn't help it nor fight it; his arms wound around Eren and embraced him back.

Chapter End Notes

I love a flustered Eren. All this time he's been around Levi and just the fact he knows it's a date makes him a mess. Because in all reality, he would be lol. And in case you didn't know, there are restaurants out there that allow you to cook your own food. When I visited New York one time, I got to enjoy this cooking experience. (I can at least cook so that helped me a bit.)

I was really excited to write the date out but I won't lie and say it didn't give me a bit of trouble. Only reason really being I had so many different ideas running through my head. I'm overall happy with this chapter and I really hope you guys enjoyed it too. I felt it revealed a lot on how much insight Levi and Eren have for each other and their conflicting feelings.

Sorry I left you all on a cliffhanger, but we are approaching our 'climax' to the story
(pun intended) very soon. Thanks again for all of you for sticking by me and giving this story so much recognition and love. I have another story in the works and I will be posting it shortly after this is complete.

I'm on tumblr at taintedashes.tumblr.com

Feel free to hit the little heart button or drop a line, cheers ya'll!
Stay

Chapter Summary

Levi and Eren share an intimate moment through words.

Chapter Notes

Two updates in a week? Say what?

I wanted to start off the New Year with a surprise. This chapter is sort of angsty. Be warned.

And no, you're not imagining things. I changed my username for personal reasons. I've updated my tumblr as well. So the link is still the same. If you have tumblr, I'd love to follow different pages. You're more than welcome to follow mine since I post an obscene amount of ereri stuff on there and story updates.

Follow me on Tumblr!

Happy New Year!

And guys, I know I always thank ya'll in each chapter but the last chapter literally got almost 70 kudos alone. So thank you to those leaving feedback and also for stopping by to comment and say hi!

It was one in the morning.

One in the morning and someone was knocking on his door.

Levi's eyes fluttered open at the sound and he moved to sit forward from his place on the couch. His back screamed in protest, falling asleep in an awkward position while his laptop, several documents, and graphs were strewn across his coffee table.
Soon the knocking turned into a frantic banging.

"Shit," Levi muttered as he nearly tripped over the side of the couch. His apartment was dimly lit with only a small lamp by his wall unit, making it more difficult for Levi's eyes to adjust. He generally didn't sleep very much but on rare occasions like tonight, his exhaustion must have caught up with him. He was going to murder whoever had woken him up, strangle them and possibly throw them over the balcony--

When Levi ripped his door open, all of his anger drained immediately.

Eren stood on the other side of the door, looking positively drained and disheveled. His hair was wet and plastered to his face and his clothes were a wrinkled mess. Levi hadn't noticed it until the soft patter from outside was within his earshot, gently dropping along the bay window on the other side of the room. It must have started raining at some point during the evening.

"I'm... shit, I'm sorry. I woke you up, didn't I?" Eren rubbed his hands along his upper arms, concealing a small tremor that ran through his body. "I shouldn't have come here, I'm sorry. I'll just--"


Eren's gaze rose and met Levi's.

"Get inside before you freeze your ass off."

The brunette nodded, momentarily closing his eyes before stepping passed Levi. He kicked his shoes off and pushed them aside with his foot.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know where else to go. I-I didn't want to go home to an empty house and I couldn't stay at the hospital anymore without losing my mind."

Levi closed the door and pointed over to the couch. "Sit."

Eren sat.
He placed his head in his hands. "My mom had a seizure because the tumor is crushing all the functioning parts of her brain. They kept trying to stabilize her but isn't showing signs of waking up. They tried for hours. All of our friends came to be there for us but it made it so much harder. I..."
Eren swallowed thickly, his leg bouncing as he spoke. "I couldn't be there anymore; I couldn't watch anymore. I'm..."

Levi stood on the opposite end of the couch, watching Eren as he raced with his words. He was on the verge of having a total breakdown and Levi felt like a piece of shit for not knowing what to do for him. So Levi did the only thing he thought he could do in times he felt an overwhelming amount of stress.

The executive chief padded his feet into the kitchen, reaching beneath one of the cabinets to pull out a small kettle. He moved fluidly, filling it up with water and placing it on the burner on the stove. Eren was still talking in circles, unable to stop himself and Levi moved as swiftly as he could.

A few moments passed and Levi opened one of the overhead cabinets, pulling out a small canister of tea he had had for quite some time. It was his favorite. He delicately scooped out its contents and brought out a small strainer next, pouring the seething water through it and into two small teacups.

Levi made his way back to the living area and placed the cup in front of Eren, who abruptly stopped his words and stared at the cup and then up to Levi.

"What... what is that?"

"My mother," Levi started and he moved to sit next to Eren. "She used to make tea to diffuse tension. When I was young, it was her way of soothing me. I suppose as I got older, the tradition of her doing that sort of stuck. Alcohol isn't my only vice."

Eren’s were red beneath the rims and puffy when Levi observed more closely. Levi held his own cup by the rim of it, bringing it to his lips and keeping his eyes on Eren to do the same. So with shaking hands, Eren gingerly picked up his cup and brought it to his lips.

"Breathe, Eren."

Eren kept his eyes closed as he inhaled deeply and then exhaled.
"Keep breathing," Levi instructed further.

They sat in an uncomfortable silence as Eren continued to cautiously drink from the teacup Levi had provided and steadied himself with deep breathing. Levi did what he could to calm the other man down. If he hadn't intervened, Eren would have had a full-blown panic attack. As time had passed, Eren's labored breathing began to even out. Levi continued to direct him through it and eased him to drink his tea. Eren's body seemed to relax more and more until he let out a breathy sigh.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

Levi leaned forward a bit, resting his arms against his legs as he did. "You don't need to apologize, brat. Do you see me kicking you out?"

Eren gave Levi silence as his response.

"After everything that had happened tonight... this was the first place you ran to?"

The young artist bowed his head and nodded as if he were ashamed to admit it.

"I... I didn't want to be alone," Eren responded in a whisper. "I was useless at the hospital. My mom... I don't understand it because she was fine yesterday. Her and my sister had just gone to the spa for the day and she was with our neighbor last night. Hannes... he hadn't said anything to either of us. It's not fair... if she isn't operated on soon, they don't think she'll make it more than a year."

Levi's heart clenched.

"I'm... I'm useless. I couldn't even help my own mother--"

Eren abruptly stopped speaking when Levi placed his hand over his. "Stop."

Eren brought his dazed eyes to meet Levi's stormy ones. "You're not useless, far from it and you know it. This was out of your control, Eren. You can't stop the course but you're capable of
You're capable of more than you probably realize."

Eren continued staring at Levi and the executive chief felt him squeezing his hand.

"I... understand what it feels like to be useless." Levi's eyes shifted around the room and landed on the picture above his fireplace. Petra gazed at them both with kind eyes and a deep smile. It was hard for him to look at sometimes. "My mother died when I was young... I was six at the time. She suffered from an infection that killed her on bed rest. My father was a piece of shit and abandoned us when he had found out she was ill. He got his though because he was found dead in a ditch two years later. Served the bastard right."

"If it weren't for my uncle, I probably would've been found dead myself. I wasn't exactly an upstanding citizen when I was younger and luckily for me, Erwin was able to save my ass before I was thrown in jail. I got my shit together and moved on."

Levi used his free hand and took a long sip of his tea and sighed.

"I've known Erwin and Hange for a long time, but I had known Petra longer. We met in high school, for fuck's sake. We were kids and as much as an asshole as I was, she didn't shy away from me like most people had in my life."

"And you fell in love, right?"

Eren smiled a bit at Levi as he said that, gently rubbing his thumb against the upper part of his hand.

Levi stiffened. "No."

Eren's thumb stopped its movement and Levi felt it immediately. Shit.

"It was... complicated," Levi began while turning to face Eren. "Petra was my closest friend and I cared about her, that is true. But we weren't attracted to one another."

The escorts eyebrows knitted in confusion and Levi couldn't blame him. "Then why did you... I mean, I don't understand."
Maybe I shouldn't have brought this up. Fuck, this kid probably thinks I'm an even bigger asshole than before.

Levi stood up abruptly, running a tired hand through his hair. Eren gazed up at Levi and simply stared for a few moments as if trying to understand the current situation. Eren had opened his world up to Levi once and it was only fair that he allow Levi the same. Weren't they trying to get to know each other better? Eren wanted to understand, he really did and Levi could see that.

Eren offered Levi an understanding smile and expectant eyes.

"You can tell me... it's all right."

Levi felt an immense amount of affection for Eren in that moment. His turquoise eyes held something in their depths and it drew Levi in. "We didn't get married for the sake of love, I married her because her parents were pushing her to marry an abusive prick."

Eren's eyes widened briefly.

"Petra's father I could deal with, he wasn't entirely too bad. But her mother--" Levi sneered at the mention of her. "She was a fucking piece of work. Petra graduated with high honors in school, she had a damn masters degree and it was never enough to satisfy the bitch. She brought up marriage constantly and it drove Petra insane. But she didn't want Petra to just marry anybody; she wanted Petra to marry someone with money."

"All she ever wanted was to make that bitch happy and I never understood why. I told her I would've washed my hands at that point but Petra... well, she was also a better person than I ever was. She wanted her to marry some piece of filth who thought he was the shit because he inherited a line of banks from daddy dearest. Her mother went out of her way to talk to the douche bag behind Petra's back and tried to sneak around and get them together. It repulsed me. I couldn't let her go through with it, the man was notorious for smacking his partners around. And it didn't surprise me that her mother didn't seem to care about the one little fact."

"You offered her an out," Eren murmured quietly, halting Levi through his angry tirade.

Levi let out a harsh breath, not realizing his voice was rising as he spoke octave by octave. "Yeah, I did. It was the only thing I could come up with. Petra was panicking. I was financially stable, I
wouldn't have put a hand on her and Petra had to freedom to do what she wanted. It was either that or let her get tossed around like a fucking rag doll by Nile."

Levi hadn't noticed Eren sputtered on his tea, so he continued.

"She accepted, we got married at a courthouse for the sake of having it on paper, and lived together. We made it work. As time passed, I offered her a divorce because I wanted her to live her own life. But she always told me it was fine, that everything was okay the way it was. She hadn't even..."

Eren observed the lump in Levi's throat. "What happened to her?"

"She started complaining about headaches and I kept brushing it off, telling her to just take aspirin and be done with it. I completely fucking disregarded her, too busy working and thinking it was nothing. She ended up having an aneurysm at home, died right in her sleep. And I just kept ignoring the fact she was fucking dying."

"You couldn't have known, how could you have? You blame yourself for her death?"

"Her parent's sure as shit did. After all the bullshit they had put Petra through, all that pressure, and they had the nerve to attack me."

There was a stilling silence in the room after that and Levi watched Eren carefully. His expressions weren't very readable in the dim light that reflected off of his face, but Levi knew he was pondering something.

"When you had mentioned feeling useless earlier... rest assured, I had felt that way at one point myself. But what's happening to your mother now is out of your control, just like what happened to Petra was out of mine. But..." Levi strode over to Eren and knelt down in front of where he was sitting, placing one hand on his knee and the other moving to grip Eren's chin, forcing his gaze on him. "She'll be all right. You have the ability to change things and you are, Eren. Don't give up, don't lose that fire inside of you that makes you-you."

Eren’s eyes watered at the intensity of Levi's words and as they fluttered closed, tears silently slid down his cheeks. "You're right," he said shakily. "You're right, I'm sorry. You didn't..." The brunette stumbled on his words and Levi couldn't make out what he was trying to say. He let out a steady breath and opened his eyes. "Thank you for being honest with me."
"I've always been honest with you, brat."

Levi anticipated as Eren leaned and placed his lips on his own. It was chaste and it was quiet, yet it spoke volumes of the understanding they both had just shared. Levi's heart was thumping rapidly in his chest and the raven-haired man could feel Eren's pulse racing against his fingertips as he hand slid gently down his jaw. When they pulled away, Eren smiled shakily.

"What is all of this?" Eren had asked a few moments later. Levi had moved around the apartment, turning on the fireplace to give the space added warmth and warming up the kettle for more tea. Eren had relaxed considerably since their talk and Levi wanted to make it comfortable for him. He was in no condition either to be wandering around this late at night even though Eren insisted he go home soon.

When Levi glanced over his shoulder, Eren was looking at the various documents on the table that was still there from earlier.

"Going over the art directors notes for the latest campaign, it's been a huge thorn in my ass. They're throwing too many pitches at me."

Eren's hands scanned over the various amount of the photos that laid before him, mesmerized. "What are they for?"

"We're advertising a line of air gliders coming in from Japan. You know, athletics and hippies loving nature and shit wanting to glide their happy asses in the air."

"That's so cool..." Eren replied. "So your job is to go over the final product?"

"Basically, although Erwin always gives the final approval. I just look it over and try to piece together the best advertising or commercial I can. Erwin trusts me, I won't put out a shitty ad and fuck someone's product over."

Eren's hand stopped it's skimming and brushed over a picture that caught his eye. "Wings?"

"I was pitched a theme along those lines, wasn't sure if I wanted to run it or not," Levi explained as he brought over two piping hot cups of fresh tea. He placed Eren's cup next to the picture and Levi sat down on the couch with his. He leaned forward and examined the picture next to Eren. "What do you think?"
"Me?"

"Hm," Levi hummed. "When you see wings, what do you think of?"

Eren examined the picture more closely. "I... well, when I see wings I see freedom."

Levi brought his cup to his lips, repressing a small smile against it at Eren's answer. It didn't surprise him. "That's what I thought as well."

Levi was rewarded with a proud smile from Eren, sitting closer to Levi to go over more of the project together. Levi enjoyed the way Eren would casually brush against him to point something out or the ability he was pushing to distract himself. Eren had been a complete mess when he had first arrived and Levi couldn't help the strange feeling that swelled through him at being able to help him in some way.

It was nearing four am when Eren had finally succumbed to his exhaustion, falling asleep on the couch. His arms were crossed against his chest and his face was turned against one of the cushions, obscuring part of his face. His breathing was steady and it was the only thing Levi could hear inside of the apartment. Levi was standing over him, staring and taking in his features a bit at a time. The way his caramel hair fell gently against his face and the slight parting of his lips as he slept. Levi had an urge to kiss them. He had an urge to hold him.

*How the hell did you manage to make me fall for you, brat?*

As he gazed at Eren, he brought his hand up and fondly touched his hair. Soft strands fell between his fingertips and Eren uttered a soft sigh in his sleep. Levi felt his lips twitch on their own and thankfully Eren was asleep, or he would have seen the smile gracing his features. Levi didn't know exactly what this was between the two of them but... it was something, wasn't it?

Trying to not disturb the young escort, Levi moved and retrieved a quilt from the linen closet and placed it gently against Eren. His gray eyes lingered for a few moments longer before he turned to let the other man sleep. As he turned, Levi felt a hand suddenly grip his forearm. When Levi glanced back down at Eren, he was looking up at Levi through heavily tired eyes.

"Stay?" he inquired softly.
Levi stood there, frozen. But soon he found himself sitting beside Eren, the brunette leaning against him and his eyes fluttering closed again. He looked at peace and Levi felt a small sense of it in that moment. Sooner than he expected, his own eyes were heavy and his head lulled to the side and above Eren’s. He fell into a soft state of surrendering consciousness as the sound of their breathing leveled out.

And they slept.
Eren felt an overwhelming sense of warmth all around his body and a calming stillness in the air. He curled further into himself, exhaustion still evident as he fought to open his eyes. He had never felt so tired before and he felt the urge to never leave his bed.

Except this wasn't his bed, his bed was a lumpy piece of crap that usually hurt his back when he stayed in one place for too long. This bed was hitting just the right pressure points on his body and making it hard for him to concentrate on a coherent thought.

Emerald eyes snapped open.

Shifting through the very expensive looking sheets, he sat up and glanced around the room. Levi's room. The room he had been in so many times on so many different occasions. But everything about this felt so different. Slowly but surely, memories sifted through his mind and he began recalling everything that had taken place the night before. Their date. His mother being rushed to the hospital. Going back to Levi afterward a sobbing mess. God, what possessed him to come here of all places?

Eren knew the answer to that already.

Their conversations began coming to light in Eren's foggy mind. Not only had Levi let Eren confide in him, but he had also taken the chance to confide to him as well. It made Eren's heart swell that Levi had trusted him and allowed him to share his burdens with him. Levi held such an incredibly large amount of guilt inside of him and it probably took everything in him to hide it. Eren would have never imagined the actual reasons behind it until he learned about it last night. Eren also hadn't realized how compassionate Levi truly was. When they had discussed getting to know each other, Eren didn't know how much there truly was to get to know until last night.

Eren felt a connection with Levi... and it scared him because he had never felt something so strong between him and another person before. Last night left him with more answers, yes... but there were still questions left unanswered. The young escort felt so conflicted. While he had found out so much about Levi in a single night, he was also placed with information about a man who seemed entangled
in both of their lives. One son of a bitch named Nile Dok, to be exact. Eren should have said something, should still say something... but something inside of him forced him to retract that information back to himself. Levi had been honest with him, he deserved his honesty as well.

But something stopped him... fear?

When his shifted his gaze toward the bedside night table, the clock read 11:13 AM. Damn... I never sleep this late. I remember being on the couch and now I'm...

Eren felt heat crawl up from his neck to his cheeks, the faint memory of him asking Levi to stay with him resurfacing. His mind was starting to become sharper as sleep left him. Levi must have at some point carried him into his own room to sleep. Eren's eyes landed on his phone on the night table and sighed as he picked it up. He had an enormous amount of missed calls and text messages. Sparing a quick glance around the room, Eren took advantage of the privacy and finally got himself out of Levi's bed. He looked down at himself and realized he was still in the clothing from the night prior. He probably looked and smelled terrible.

He decided to use Levi's connecting bathroom to make himself presentable. The bathroom was painted with blues and grays, adding a cooling effect when you walked inside. Eren couldn't help but think it suited Levi well. There was quiet decor all around as well, he noticed after flicking the lights on.

When Eren looked at his reflection, he grimaced. His eyes were still puffy from the night before and his skin looked paler. His hair was sticking up on one particular side of his head and his clothes looked like he had just found them in a bin outside. He was surprised Levi even let him sleep in his bed in this condition. Ugh, He didn't even have a toothbrush.

Working with what he had, Eren tossed water over his face and ran some through his hair. When he felt satisfied his hair had returned to a somewhat normal state, he reached and did what he could without a toothbrush for his mouth. Nothing made him squirm more than morning breath and he was sure Levi felt the same. He tried his best to straighten out his clothes and make himself look less like a homeless man and more like himself. After several minutes, Eren felt a hell of a lot better than he did when he had awoken.

While he still had some privacy, Eren pulled out his phone and dialed for Mikasa.

Please... please, be good news. He thought while he listened to the soft ringing on the other end.
The line clicked. "Eren?"

"Mika," he breathed out in relief. "Hey."

"Hey? You know I've been trying to call you all night, right? Where the hell have you--"

"Mikasa," Eren started firmly. "I'm safe, I'm all right. Can you please just tell me if Mom's okay or not?"

"That's why I've been trying to get a hold of you. They were able to stabilize Carla early this morning. She's still a bit shaky and weak but she's starting to come around and speak with us and the medical team."

Eren hadn't realized he slumped against the bathroom counter in relief, tears prickling his eyes a bit. "That's... shit, I'm so happy to hear that! I got so scared... really scared, Mikasa..."

"I did too," she admitted quietly. "But at least she's awake right now. We'll figure out the rest. Are you on your way here?"

Eren sniffed. "I'll be there soon, just need to take care of a few things. I'll see you in an hour, alright?"

Eren tapped the hang up button on his phone and held it to his chest, closing his eyes and breathing deeply to steady himself. She woke up... she's awake. Maybe Levi was right along, giving up isn't an option. I can't give up on her. There's still a chance!

When Eren exited Levi's room, he found the executive chief sitting at the dining room table on his laptop. He was casually typing away while taking hold of his teacup and bringing it to his lips. Eren didn't know how to approach this situation. He had always left in the middle of the night after their encounters so standing here late in the morning was a bit new for them both. Levi took it in stride it seemed because his sharp eyes gazed upward as Eren stood on the other side of the apartment.

"Morning, sunshine."
Eren swallowed a bit, fighting down a blush. "Um... good morning."

"Tried waking you a few times since your phone was blowing up, but you didn't budge. Figured you were tired as shit. I didn't want to leave you on the couch since I had a conference call this morning so I brought you into my room. Figured it'd be quiet enough." Levi drummed his fingers on the table in front of him. "Coffee?"

"Please," Eren replied before he could stop himself.

After a few moments, Eren sat at the table with Levi. He was offered a hot mug with all it's caffeinated glory and took the first sip with a sigh. "I talked to my sister," Eren started, hoping to break whatever tension he was feeling inside of his own stomach. "My mom woke up this morning, they were able to finally stabilize her."

"That's good to hear," Levi expressed with a small smile. "I told you things would work out, brat."

Eren held his mug with both hands, softly smiling while gazing down into the liquid inside of it. There were a few quiet moments that had passed as Eren watched Levi sip from his cup, observing Eren as he did the same. "You feeling okay?"

"I'm... yeah, I'm fine. I still feel a little tired." The escort confessed against his mug. His hands tightened on the glass of it, eyes finally lifting to meet Levi's. "Levi... I..." Shit, he was stammering. Why was he having such a hard time speaking what was on his mind? "I'm..."

One of Levi's brows rose in question, his head tilting imploringly.

Eren let out a huff of air and placed his mug on the table. "Thank you for last night," he started. His eyes fluttered and his gaze moved toward the floor. "Thank you for not shutting me out. I can be stupid and reckless when I'm high on my emotions like I was last night. I'm... I'm glad I came here."

"Brat," Levi spoke the name so softly, it caused Eren's head to raise and stare at him. When their eyes caught, Eren noticed a warmth in the other mans gaze he hadn't seen before. "I'm glad you came here too."

Eren's heart started fucking somersaulting.
"There's something else," Eren added in quietly. "I wasn't sure how to bring it up last night..." The brunette was fidgeting suddenly, wringing his hands together while his anxiety skyrocketed. "I've--"

Levi's sharp gaze moved from Eren toward the table as his phone vibrated against the wood, silencing Eren before he could continue. "Hold that thought, I need to take this."

Eren observed as Levi rose from his seat, bringing the phone to his mouth while barking out: "Ackerman."

He sat there, hating himself. His hands stopped their dance and soon clenched into angry fists. His fists were nearly white as he watched Levi casually pace while speaking quietly into his phone. I don't deserve him. He's been nothing but straightforward and honest with me and I can't bring myself to hurt him with the truth. How would he react?

Eren felt his mouth twist. I'm a fucking coward.

When Levi finished his call, he walked back into the room and noticed Eren staring at his hands. "Sorry about that," he said, catching Eren's attention once more. "Erwin's always so fucking chatty, I can't stand it."

Eren forced himself to smile when Levi sat back down. "You wanted to tell me something?"

Swallowing thickly, Eren nodded. He stood up and walked over toward the raven-haired man, leaning down and lacing his lips chastely against Levi's. Levi seemed surprised for a moment but closed his eyes and brought a hand toward the side of Eren's face. He caressed Eren's cheek fondly and it made Eren's stomach turn with guilt. When they parted, Levi was a bit breathless. "What was that for?"

"I didn't get to properly thank you for our date," Eren murmured quietly. "Yesterday was an emotional rollercoaster, but I had a great time with you."

Levi's hand continued to gently press against Eren's cheek, cradling him as the brunette leaned over
him. His eyes were searching; calculating as he gazed into endless emerald. Eren felt scrutinized under those orbs. "I did too," the executive chiefs deep voice replied while his lips twitched briefly.

Eren let out a small breath, uncertain of what else he could possibly say to properly express what was dwelling inside of his racing heart. His eyes briefly fluttered shut when he said: "I should probably go before my sister finds out where you live and breaks your door down."

Levi hummed, rubbing his thumb on Eren's cheek before pulling back. "You probably should. I can drive you if you want."

"I'll be fine walking... honestly, I think I need a little air and some time to think," the brunette replied.

Eren found it hard to pull away but he forced himself to, fluidly moving to stand and gaze at Levi a bit longer. "Thank you again... I'll let you know how things are?"

It was meant to be a statement, but it came out as a question instead. Levi nodded in response though. "Of course."

Of course. The words rang inside of Eren's head over and over again as he gathered himself and left the apartment. Levi walked after him, closing the door behind him quietly. After Eren exited, he leaned against the door for a moment. He let out a stuttering breath and placed his hand against his chest. He felt an overwhelming urge to cry and he couldn't quite place why. He hadn't realized that on the other side of that door, Levi leaned heavily against it as well.

When Eren arrived at the hospital, Mikasa was pacing impatiently in the lobby. Her arms were crossed against her chest and her eyes were staring at the floor. As Eren approached, her attention directed toward him immediately. She jogged up to him and her expression indicated she wanted to ask him where he had been, why he hadn't been here and so on. Eren could understand why; he really could. But all that was on his mind was his mother. To calm his sister's overprotective anxiety, Eren leaned and caught her in a surprise embrace.

"Hey," he said shortly. "I'm sorry I ran off last night... it was really too much for me, Mika."

Mikasa sighed against him and wrapped her arms around him. "I know... I'm sorry, Eren. I wasn't trying to overbear you, I think I was panicking."
His sisters embrace comforted him and he smiled softly. "I panicked too," he admitted.

They pulled apart and Eren brought his best facade forward. "Where is she? Did they move her?"

"They moved her earlier. She's on the second floor now."


They entered the elevator together and ascended toward the next floor, all the while Eren prepared himself for the worst. Seeing his mother suffer the way she had for the past few years had taken its toll on him. He felt helpless; useless. But inside of his mind, he remembered Levi's words and they brought him more comfort than he could have admitted. He didn't know what he would have done last night if he hadn't shown up on Levi Ackerman's doorstep.

Memories of Levi flooded his mind as he exited the elevator and followed Mikasa through the main corridor of the floor. When they arrived at his mother's room, Eren took in a steady inhale to ground himself before entering.

Carla Yeager was laying in her hospital bed, wires littered around her body. She was currently sitting forward a bit, glancing forward at the television mounted on the wall while trying to navigate the channels. Her hair looked thinner than usual; her face sunken in while her eyes held black depths. Eren felt his heart cracking in his chest at her weak appearance. One of the qualities he shared with his mother was her stubbornness to give in. She appeared to act as if nothing was wrong with her.

Her head turned when he and Mikasa entered the room and Eren held back his tears. "Mom..." he said shakily.

"Eren," she replied weakly. "Oh honey, come here."

Eren crossed the room and went to her bed, leaning over her to wrap his arms around her. "Mom," he said again with more strength.

He hadn't realized it until he heard his mother hushing him softly that he was sobbing, clinging to her thin body. "Sweetheart, please don't cry. Shh, it's all right."
Eren clenched his eyes shut as if believing so would will his tears to stop, but it didn't. He felt floodgates opening inside of his heart. "I'm sorry... I should've been home. I should have been able to do something--" he sniffed quietly. "None of this is all right, not one bit. I'm just so happy to see you awake."

Carla was rubbing soothing circles on Eren's back. "I'm glad too. There's nothing you could have done, Eren. Please don't blame yourself for any of this. The doctors are working hard to help me, have faith that they'll figure this out."

Eren's sobbing began to subside into small bouts of sniffs and hiccups, finally pulling back from his mother. He noticed a few more wires were connected to the crown of her head. She noticed where his eyes had landed and sighed, gently rubbing his cheek. "You were always such a sensitive boy," she said endearingly.

"I... I can't help it. We didn't know if you were going to wake up!"

"I'm awake now," Carla replied calmly, retrieving her hand back to her side. "We'll get through this. Be strong for me, okay? I know you can because you're such an incredibly strong person."

Eren's eyes fluttered closed at her words. I don't know how much longer I can be strong, Mom.

When he re-opened his eyes, Eren nodded and did his best to smile. "I will... I promise I'll try."

"Good, now," Carla started while clasping her hands together. "Hannes is downstairs getting some lunch, he should be back up soon. Maybe you can meet him down there and get yourself something? I'm only saying this because I'm your mother, but you look terrible."

Eren's lips finally broke into a smile, laughing quietly under his breath. "You always know just what to say, huh, Mom?"

"I can go," Mikasa offered while standing in the doorway. "I'll help Hannes bring up something for all of us and it'll give you two some time to catch up," she added.

Mikasa's gaze spoke volumes as if to say: Spend time with her... she's missed you.
Eren returned with his eyes saying: I will, I know.

"Thank you, sweetheart. That'd be great." Carla enthused with a smile.

Mikasa nodded and briefly watched the two of them before exiting out into the hallway. Eren could see her stride down the hall before she disappeared from sight.

"Hannes is here too?" Eren asked.

"Mhm," his mother hummed. She was running her hands over the hospital blanket, appearing anxious. "I hope that's okay."

"Of course it is, why wouldn't it be?"

Carla's smiled softened and Eren noticed a faint blush on her cheeks.

Oh.

"Are you... are the two of you..." Eren stammered. Carla lowered her head a bit. "Seriously? You and Hannes? How long has this been going on?"

"Only a few months," Carla admitted. Eren wasn't outraged per say, but definitely surprised. It was evident all over his features. "Don't act so surprised! He's been good to me and has helped me tremendously since the diagnosis. Besides, I'm the one who had to find out from your sister that you went out on a date last night."

"W-What? She said that?"

"She didn't have to. She told me that she had to help you pick out an outfit to go out with a friend," Carla used his fingers to make quotations in the air. "Really Eren, could you have been more obvious? I'm your mother, I can sense these things. What I'm upset about is you didn't tell me you were seeing someone."
Eren inwardly groaned. His mother had ridiculously spot-on instincts.

"Can we not talk about this?"

"Don't deflect; we haven't had a chance to sit down and really talk. You're always so busy... between school and working. I miss being able to talk to you, honey. I..." She sighed. "I worry about you."

Oh, not you too. All aboard the guilt express.

"You're worried about me when you're the one laying in this hospital bed?"

"I'm your mother, it's my job to worry." That has to be the most classic line in parenting history.

Eren sighed loudly, looking as his mother glanced up with expectant eyes. She's not going to let this go, is she?

"Fine, but you can't tell Mikasa."

Carla leaned forward on the bed a bit. "My lips are sealed."

Eren took a deep breath. "I... alright, I went out on a date last night."

"I knew it," Carla responded smugly. Eren shot her a playful glare.

"It was a little unexpected of him to ask me," he continued. His felt his mothers eyebrows furrow from where he was sitting on the bed.

"Ah... I did always wonder," she murmured more toward herself than anybody.

"I'm... I mean, I'm not... you know, well, maybe I am. But with him, it's just... different."
"So... tell me about him, what's his name?"

I'm not sure if I should be telling her this... I don't even know where Levi and I stand.

"Levi," Eren said after a few moments. "His name is Levi. He's a little older than me... shorter too. Which is fine, since I can't picture him being taller. He'd probably get pissed off at me for saying that. He's really blunt and to the point... but not in a bad way. He's just really honest, I guess? I didn't like him very much when we first met but he really surprised me. He acts really standoffish but he's actually a really compassionate person. And he's just... why are you looking at me like that?"

Carla was smiling knowingly at her son. "He sounds wonderful," she said. "You should've seen your eyes when you were talking about him."

What does that mean?

At Eren's perplexed expression, his mother laughed lightly. "Call it a mothers intuition, but I know love when I see it."

Eren's heart suddenly slammed painfully into his chest.

"L-Love?" he squeaked.

Carla hummed quietly in affirmation.

The word replayed over and over in Eren's mind. Love. Love love love--

"I-- no, that's not right. I've only known him for a few months! Don't be silly, Mom."

"Perhaps you're right," she replied. "You'll need to figure that out for yourselves, won't you?"

Eren's chest was hurting. "Oh, look! Mikasa is texting me... she wants me to meet them downstairs to
help bring up some food!

Carla looked at Eren questionably as he rose from the bed, though there was a depth of understanding in her chestnut eyes as Eren sheepishly slid out of the room. When Eren ran down the hall, Carla knew in her heart she had just opened Eren's heart to his own feelings.

"Ah son," she sighed and laid back against the pillows, knowing full well Mikasa hadn't sent him one text message. "You're possibly even more stubborn than me."

Love?

Eren sat in one of the chairs by his mother's hospital bed, staring blankly at his bowl of chicken soup. He hadn't eaten a damn thing that day and he couldn't stomach the thought of eating. His eyes rose and he watched as Hannes, his mother and Mikasa were caught up in conversation.

Is she on morphine? Maybe that's why she was talking so much nonsense?

But is it nonsense? Eren couldn't quite place it. It sounded ridiculous. He knew he had feelings for Levi, he had already admitted that to himself. As far as he could tell, Levi had feelings for him as well. They were so busy dancing their way around each other Eren hadn't really laid out those feelings and sorted them out yet. It sounded so incredibly simple yet felt damn near impossible to understand. Levi hired him for his services and Eren accepted because it was his job. That should have been the draw point; that should have been all there was to it.

But it wasn't.

And all of a sudden, it didn't sound so ridiculous.

"Hey, Eren. You all right there? You're spacin' out an awful lot." Hannes had called for his attention when he noticed Eren staring pointlessly into his meal.

Eren's head shot up. "What?"

"He's just tired, aren't you, honey?" Carla covered for him with a pitiful smile.
All three of them were peering at him. "I... yeah, I am tired."

"You really need to eat," Mikasa insisted. "You're getting so thin."

"Oh, would you stop? I'm really just tired. I didn't get a lot of sleep last night," he explained with a scowl.

Mikasa sighed quietly, looking defeated; looking like she wanted to say more on that subject.

As their conversation started turning, there was a light knocking on the door. All of their heads turned in unison and saw one of the doctors standing there with a clipboard in hand. "I hope I'm not interrupting," he said. He was older, probably in his fifties. He wore a pair of thick glasses and had drawn back gray hair.

"Not at all," Carla assured him as he entered.

The doctor glanced down at his clipboard. "I'm Dr. Liech, I'll be here for most of the night. Is this your family?" he asked as his eyes peered up and around the room.

"They are," Carla confirmed.

"Alright. So, we'll be running several tests on your later in the evening to assess where we stand. I know an MRI was run earlier yesterday evening but I'm requesting another be done. We'll also run a few scans." He walked over to the bed and checked Carla's ankles, her wrists, examined the fluids and IV's that were currently hooked in place. He appeared very thorough. "Any discomfort I should know about?"

"Headaches come and go, sometimes I feel a bit dizzy... fatigue..." Carla's voice drifted and Eren frowned deeply.

"Have you been able to figure out what can be done for her?" Eren cut through their conversation.
"We'll be admitting her to a different part of the hospital, cancer, and treatment. Probably by tomorrow afternoon. We have the facts that the tumor is crushing vital portions of her brain. There is fluid buildup. Depending on what those scans reveal, we can't really tell you what our next course of action will be yet."

"Is there anything we can do for her? Anything at all?" Eren pleaded.

"Just be there for her." Dr. Liech responded. "Follow our directions. We know you three have done an exceptional job at maintaining your mother's medications and treatments. But, it isn't enough. We need to do more."

Eren liked the fact this doctor didn't sugar coat bullshit to feed them. It brought dread to life inside of Eren's body but it also relieved him to hear such honesty. He nodded his head in agreement, his mouth suddenly to dry to speak.

"It'll be all right, son." Dr. Liech said when he saw his expression. "We'll do whatever we can for her."

All Eren could do was nod his head again.

Dr. Liech examined his watch. "I believe visiting hours are coming to an end. Just in time, Ms. Yeager, since we need to draw some blood to send to the lab." He adjusted his glasses and glanced at all of them. "I'll be back in five minutes so you can say your goodbyes."

With that, the doctor has left the room.

"Mikasa, are you going straight to work after this?" Carla asked as she hugged the other woman.

"I am," she replied. She looked at Eren apologetically. "I should be able to swing and take you home before I go."

"Nonsense," Hannes said as he clapped a hand on Eren's shoulder. "I'll take the kid home, you don't need to be rushing around while driving."
Carla smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Hannes."

Hannes flashed her a grin and Eren looked between the two of them. Oh boy.

Carla directed her gaze to Eren and held out her arms toward him. Eren smiled softly and walked across the room, leaning down to wrap his arms around his mother. "I love you, Mom."

"Oh honey, I love you too. I'm so happy you were here today," she said softly against his neck. "Everything is going to be okay, you'll see. Remember what I said, be strong for me, okay?"

Eren nodded his head and closed his eyes. "I'll try, I promise."

Hannes had just gotten his old Buick Rivera onto the main freeway as the sun began to set. It had been a long day. Eren was absolutely enervated as he leaned his head against his closed fist and stared out the window. He needed a shower. He probably needed food too. He needed to think. The words him and his mother exchanged; the words him and Levi exchanged wouldn't stop storming through his mind.

He was so utterly tired.

"You look like hell," Hannes noted from his place in the driver's seat. He turned the wheel with ease as he passed several slower vehicles.

Eren huffed a bit at the statement. "I definitely feel it, too."

"It's been... a really crazy couple of days," Hannes amended.

"I never see you drive this car," Eren noted quietly when silence fell over them again.

Hannes spared him a glance. "Ah well... figured I give her one last drive before I up and sell her."

Ocean eyes turned briefly. "Sell it?"
Hannes nodded with a quiet hum. "Being a classic car, she's worth quite a bit. Sell her for a good price and use that money toward the surgery."

Eren's eyes widened fractionally. "You... you'd do that for her?"

The older man turned his attention back to the road, smiling softly. "You find that really surprising?"

"A little... I mean-- ah, hell," Eren sighed and leaned forward in his seat. He threaded his fingers together. "I know you've always been there for her... especially when I couldn't be. I've been a terrible son; never around and never home. I don't find it surprising that you'd do something to help her."

"Hey now," Hannes cut in quickly. "Stop that, you're not a terrible son. And you and Mikasa do nothing but bust your asses and go to school. Carla is beyond proud of the both of you. She says so every day," he explained as he drove the car off the freeway and onto the southern side streets.

Eren smiled at those words. "She also told me the two of you have been seeing each other for a few months."

"Ah, did she now?" Hannes brought up his hand and sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. "She's been wanting to tell you for a while but wasn't sure when the right time was. She didn't want to push that on you," he added. Risking a quick glance, Hannes asked: "You're okay with all of this?"

The brunette shrugged. "I mean, she's an adult and she of all people deserves to be happy."

"I... struggled with it for a while. I've known you all since you moved here. Loved your father to death, he was an exceptional guy. Did everything he could for Carla and you kids," the older man gripped the steering wheel tightly. "He'd probably hate me right now."

"Come on, you know that isn't true. I'm sure he'd be happier knowing my moms with you and not some scumbag."

Hannes whistled. "You're being very mature about this, I've gotta say."
Eren shot the man a glare and then chuckled. "I guess she could do worse than you."

A light punch was thrown at his shoulder and Hannes grinned at him. "I'll take that as a compliment."

The first thing Eren did when he got home was step into the shower, washing away the remains of what had been a very chaotic two days. He had stood under the stream, gazing upward to the ceiling and just let his thoughts carry him away. He could feel the knots in his shoulders and a dull ache lingered in his back. Stress was dominating his entire body. When he had finished, he threw on a pair of cotton sweat-pants and a long sleeve shirt that fell a bit on his shoulders. His hair was wet and matted against his face.

The second thing he did was go to the refrigerator to see what was edible. There hadn't been much traffic in the house that day so he threw away any spoiled food and hit a stroke of luck when he found a few prepared meals inside of some tupperware. Eren inwardly smiled, knowing Mikasa was always a few steps ahead of him.

The house was eerily quiet. Eren turned on the television while he forced himself to eat some leftover pasta and chicken. His stomach was empty to the point it was eating itself but he still had to remind himself he needed to eat because his sister had been right, he was losing weight.

Nothing interesting was on and even if there was, Eren couldn't bring himself to focus on anything at all.

Soon, he found himself pacing around the dark house. He passed each empty room, staring into each of them quietly before sighing and forcing himself to settle on the couch again. It was absolutely no use, Eren felt so damn restless. All he could think about was the conversations that had transpired that day.

Love. My mother said she saw love in my eyes. Could I possibly...?

Eren kept his phone by him for most of the night, trying his best to distract himself. He could call Armin, Annie, even Jean just to have someone to talk to.

He didn't call any of the individuals that came to mind, on the contrary, he called the last person he expected he'd call.
Eren walked out of the house and stepped onto the front porch, hugging himself when the cold caressed his body. He moved his fingers along the screen of his phone anyway, suddenly feeling the urge to talk to him; to just hear his voice. After a moment, he brought the phone to his ear as it rang quietly.

He felt blood roaring in his ears.

"Ackerman," a deep voice answered.

Eren stopped his pacing and leaned against the railing. "Hi... it's me."

"Eren," Levi's voice responded.

"Um... am I calling too late? I'm calling too late, aren't I?"

"It's only nine at night, you're fine. You know I don't sleep very much."

"Okay... good. That's good." Eren's hands absentmindedly ran over the cool railing over and over, his words dying inside of his throat. He heard Levi shuffling on the other end of the phone. He was waiting; being patient.

"How did everything go today?" Levi broke the long silence.

"Not... quite as expected. But I saw my mom and she's awake. She... looks so sick, but she was acting like nothing was wrong."

"Stubborn like you, I take it?"

Eren smiled despite himself. "I guess I get it from her."

"Nothing new on her condition?" Levi inquired.
"They're going to run more tests tonight and tomorrow. Visiting hours were over so Hannes drove me home. I... well, I'm exhausted."

"You definitely sound it," Levi amended. "Maybe you should take the time and sleep. You've dealt with a lot today."

Eren felt his fists clenching. "I know, but I can't sleep. I'm restless. I just... wanted to let you know what was going on. I hope you're okay with me calling."

He was sure he felt Levi scowling. "Of course it's okay, shitty brat. You'd think after all time, you'd know the answer to your own questions."

Eren threw his head back and laughed; if only Levi knew how true that statement was.

Quiet seconds ticked by and Eren walked over toward the rocking chair in front of the house and sat down. "You know..." he began. "I told my mom about you today."

There was a pregnant pause. "Did you now? What'd you tell her? Did you tell her I was a miserable old bastard?"

"Of course not," Eren replied sharply. "I guess my sister spilled that I had her help me pick out an outfit to meet you in, even though I told her I was meeting a friend."

"I take it your mother knew better?"

"'Mothers intuition' she called it."

"And your sister really had to help you figure out what to wear? I'm a bit flattered."


They shared a short moment of amusement and Eren felt the air around him suddenly become lighter.
Eren's chest felt warm. He felt... comfort. Love, he wondered to himself. Is this what love feels like?

"Will I see you this week?" Eren asked in a quiet tone.

"I'll be around during the week, but I'll be gone for the weekend."

"Oh," Eren replied shortly, mentally cursing himself for letting his disappointment be known. He held his phone with both hands and saw his breath against the cold air outside.

"We have a convention coming up. It's usually held every year. Different advertising companies and agencies coming together to present their work before it goes public," Levi explained calmly. Eren hoped he didn't sound too upset. "I can't back out of it either. As the executive chief, I, unfortunately, have to be there."

"Doesn't sound like you want to go," Eren observed.

Levi scoffed noisily. "I don't, but... this is my job. I'm going to have to deal with a bunch of rich fucking snobs and stuck up assholes just to make a good image for the company."

"Sounds boring."

"It's going to be out of town. New Hampshire. It's almost like an outdated prom for adults, if you ask me. I can at least get drunk when I'm being forced to shake hands with these pompous pricks."

Eren laughed lightly to himself.

"You could come with me if you want."

The young escorts breathing stilled for a second. "What?"

"I had meant to ask you a few days ago, but the timing didn't seem right. You have so much going on so it's alright if you're not interested. I'd pay you, of course."
There it was. That one line that made Eren's stomach churn.

"Of course," he echoed softly.

"Look, I know you have a lot to deal with. So it's okay if you'd rather not--"

"I didn't say that," Eren said abruptly. "I... we don't need to talk about payment or reason right now. If you need company, I'll go with you."

"Are you sure? What about your sister and--"

"Please," Eren said desperately. "Don't... don't talk to me like that. I need a distraction, Levi."

Eren could hear Levi's soft breathing through the phone and the stillness around him was suffocating.

"Levi, please. Just tell me when to meet you and what I need to prepare myself for. I'll go with you, you know I will."

Levi affirmed his agreement and let Eren know he'd call him later during the week to discuss details. After a couple of minutes, Eren was leaning forward heavily in the chair outside.

"I'll talk to you in a few days," he said.

"You will. Try to get some sleep, Eren. You sound like you need it."


His heart raced when Levi responded with, "Goodnight, brat."
Eren retreated inside and into the warmth of his house. Even with the heat, Eren felt a strange hollowness he couldn't place. He made his way into his room and collapsed noisily onto his bed. His turquoise eyes averted to the ceiling, staring with a distant expression. He wanted so desperately to sleep but knew it wouldn't greet him so quickly.

*I can figure this out,* he thought. *A weekend alone with him. I'll straighten out the details... but, if it's just me and him, maybe I'll finally know.*

Eren clenched his phone against his chest and he smiled.

Chapter End Notes

So... I had a bit of trouble with this chapter. I'm not sure why. I didn't want it to be TOO angsty but of course, given the situation I have placed these two in, I feel it's inevitable. But it'll be slowing down now. I hope I didn't fuck up with this chapter but I felt it was important.

I love writing Eren and Carla, by the way.

Thank you all who continue to support, comment, leave kudos, bookmark and share... It's really so encouraging. I have currently finished the first chapter of my next Ereri project. I cannot wait to post it. I'm going to wait until I am finished with Woven Strings -- which, I wanna say is about five chapters away from being finished? Who knows with me. I'm a bit of a wild card when it comes to stories.

Cheers everyone!
Levi sorted through his walk-in closet, carefully checking for his best suits and attires to pack. He and Erwin had gone over the itinerary for the weekend and as far as Levi was concerned, he only had to play dress-up for one night. The convention he had mentioned to Eren usually happened during the beginning of March of each year. Fellow advertising companies came together from different parts of the world. Although he wasn't sure why Manchester had been the place of choice this year; Levi couldn't complain. It was a small city compared to New York. It was quiet and calm.

Not only was that what he needed, but he was sure Eren needed some tranquility as well.

The second day they'd be there would include some conferences and Eren didn't need to be present for those. He'd either fall asleep or die of boredom, whichever came first. It was a surprise Levi didn't as well. But professional was the name of the game. The second night usually consisted of dinner with his colleagues before they'd travel back home the next day.

It was Friday evening when Levi began to pack. His usual dread of another fruitless weekend was now shifting. Instead, he found himself looking forward to having Eren to himself for two days. The words that were uttered that night on the phone with the young escort replayed repeatedly inside of his head.

*I'll pay you, of course.*

Levi had remembered the first time he had asked Eren to accompany him to the small company party back in December, opening the deal with those words. He knew at the time they'd snag Eren's attention, seeing as though he knew Eren wasn't particularly fond of him. But now...

Levi hadn't been sure why he said those words at the time, possibly to ensure that Eren would go with him. Because a more primitive part of him; a very selfish part of him wanted Eren for himself. He was tired of lying to himself, tired of this game they had created from the start. He wanted him.
And he recalled when Eren responded with a hollow, *Of course.*

The younger man hadn't sounded like himself, instead, he sounded almost disappointed. Eren had been subtle though and if Levi hadn't been learning to read people his entire life, he probably wouldn't have caught onto it.

This was it, Levi thought as he closed his suitcase and hoisted it off of his bed.

*Showtime.*

Eren was a mess when he showed up Annie's apartment Friday evening.

When she answered the door, her flat gaze widened a bit at his appearance. "I'm sorry for just showing up like this, but I need to talk to you."

Annie stepped aside, dressed in casual sweatpants and a baggy t-shirt. Her hair was down for once which let Eren know she wasn't working tonight. "You could've just called, you know. I always have my phone with me."

"I was already in the area," Eren answered as he slipped his coat off. He glanced around the apartment and then back at the blonde. "Reiner and Bertolt aren't home?"

"Working," she answered shortly. She strode passed Eren and pulled two chairs out at the dining room table. "Sit, let's talk."

"I need a favor," Eren began as he sat across from Annie. "I have plans this weekend... I'm actually leaving the state. If Mikasa found out, she'd bombard me with nothing but questions. I need you to say I'm staying here if she decides to poke around."

One of Annie's brows lifted. "Not that I mind doing it, but do you really think she'll believe me if she comes by here and sees you're not here?"

"I don't know what else to do. Armin is going with his grandfather to an exhibit tomorrow and Mikasa wouldn't believe me for a second if I said I was spending a weekend with Jean. I can't back out of this, it's too important."
Annie sighed, resigning to herself for a short moment before turning her blue gaze back to Eren. "Where exactly are you going?"

Eren hesitated, but he trusted Annie's discretion. "New Hampshire."

"With...?" she prodded.

Swallowing, Eren answered, "Levi Ackerman."

Annie's expressions very rarely changed, so Eren was surprised when her eyes widened. "You're still seeing him? After all of these months?"

"It's... complicated, Annie."

One of the reasons Eren got along so well with Annie was the fact she didn't pry. As far as she was concerned, if Eren wanted to see Levi Ackerman than she couldn't stop him. It was unusual, however, for someone in their line of work to spend so much time with one client. So Annie decided to speak what was on her mind.

"You have feelings for him, don't you?"

Seemingly caught off guard by the question, Eren stared at Annie. He tried to brew an ideal excuse for his time spent with Levi but just couldn't come up with one. So he sighed deeply, nodding. "Yeah, I do. And I'd like to think he has feelings for me too. But we keep avoiding that topic." Eren tapped his fingers against the outside of his left thigh. "I want to try to clear that up this weekend. I'll have two days alone with him and I'm going crazy not knowing where we stand. We're both being stubborn and I'm not going to lie and say I'm not scared."

"Scared of what? Him rejecting you?"

"Yes, exactly that."
"Then it sounds like you've got a lot to sort out. I'll keep Mikasa off your back for you if she comes around and let the other two know. When are you leaving?"

"Levi's sending a limo for me tomorrow morning. Mikasa will be at work, which is perfect. We have a flight at 10 AM. I'm already packed and ready to go." Eren stood up from where he was sitting and smiled softly. "Thank you for doing this for me, you have no idea how much it means to me."

Annie nodded shortly, brushing some hair away from her face as she stood up. She walked behind Eren as he threw his coat on. "I hope things work out for you, Eren."

Eren regarded her quietly before murmuring, "You and me both."

Levi had arrived at Eren's house an hour and a half before their flight Saturday morning, stepping out of the back of the limousine and resting his back against it. It was the first time he had actually *seen* Eren's home. The neighborhood looked quiet, quaint even. A different contrast to his higher-class area. But it was still a beautiful house. He had phoned Eren five minutes before arriving, letting him know he was almost there. Eren hadn't mentioned if anybody was home and Levi didn't want to let his presence be known for Eren's sake.

The air was brisk and chilly from the early morning air, but it was beginning to get better as the days went on. Spring was nearing soon and although Levi did personally enjoy the winter season, he couldn't lie and say he wasn't ready for some warmth. He tugged at his long coat, his heart hammering inside of his chest as the front door to Eren's house opened, revealing the emerald eyed man stepping through the threshold with a suitcase in tow. He was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved army-green shirt, a light jacket adorned above it. He muttered a soft explicit as his suitcase caught the edge of the door when he tried closing it behind him. Levi sighed and shook his head, chuckling under his breath. *Clumsy brat.*

"Need some help?" Levi called as he pushed himself off of the car. Eren lifted his head as Levi made his way to him, reaching down and brushing Eren's hand away from the handle of the suitcase. "Give it here," he said. Eren blinked but let Levi tug the luggage toward the limousine. "Christ, what did you pack in here? A body?"

"I didn't know what clothes to pack, so I may have gone a little overboard," Eren admitted while rubbing the back of his neck and offering Levi a sheepish smile. "Sorry, you insisted."

The driver had the hazards on as Levi stepped around and placed Eren's luggage next to his in the trunk, closing it with a quick snap of his wrists. He turned his stormy eyes toward Eren and let his gaze wrack up and down. "Good morning, by the way."
Eren's smile turned into a more genuine one, leaning quickly to peck at Levi's lips before pulling back just as quickly. The motion caught Levi by surprise. "Good morning," he replied evenly.

Levi cleared his throat, blaming the cold for the redness he felt blossom on his cheeks. "We still have time to stop and eat, if you're hungry. I figured the earlier we leave, the better since we'll need to get through the security checkpoints."

As Levi spoke, he walked past Eren to open the door for him. Eren slipped inside and Levi closed the car door before stepping around and sliding inside himself. Eren rubbed his arms to get himself warm, chuckling quietly. "I'm not really hungry, actually. I don't think I could eat even if I wanted to."

"Pre-flight jitters?" Levi asked.

Eren shrugged as Levi nodded the go-ahead to their driver. "I haven't flown in a long time... so I guess it's just a natural reaction for me. Once we're up in the air, I'll be fine. I hope I'm not underdressed, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to wear while we fly."

"You could've gone in your pajama's for all I care. It'll just be me and you, don't worry. Erwin and Hange are already ahead of us since Erwin is one of the few setting this all up. We'll have plenty of time to check in and get ready for tonight."

Eren nodded slowly, staring outside of the window as they continued to make their way to the airport. "Levi," he said softly.

Levi glanced Eren's way, humming quietly in reply.

"Thank you for bringing me with you," he said after a few moments of silence.

Levi's brow furrowed, trying to understand why Eren had said those words. But a smile played on his lips shortly, nodding his head and gazing out the window himself.

"Thank you for coming with me," he replied.
Levi hated airports, he absolutely *fucking* hated them.

It took them much longer to check in than Levi had anticipated, remembering that Saturday was a pretty high traffic day to travel. Levi liked to think he was a patient man seeing as he traveled on a regular basis, but his patience was a bit thinner than usual. Particularly because his nerves were fried and his stomach was clenching because of the presence of one bright-eyed young man. After a grueling forty-five minutes of going through security, Levi and Eren disposed of their luggage at checkout and presented their tickets.

They made their way through the terminal toward the plane and Levi noticed how nervous Eren seemed. Without realizing it, Levi reached and grasped Eren's hand in his own. He rubbed his thumb soothingly against the soft skin of his knuckles. "It'll be alright, it's a short flight."

Eren looked down at their joined hands and smiled, nodding and trying to squander his anxiety. "I know, I'll be alright."

Erwin had always purchased first-class tickets, so when Eren boarded the plane behind Levi and walked past the first curtain, he was stunned at how different it looked from commercial flying. It was spacious and open, which helped settle Eren's nerves it seemed. The flight attendant showed them to their seats and Levi ushered Eren in first. "I think you'll feel better in the window seat."

Eren nodded and sat down, already reaching for his belt and fastening it. "How often do you fly? You don't seem nervous at all."

Levi shrugged and took his seat, following Eren and clipping his belt. "Usually once a month, sometimes more depending on the time of year. Holidays are busy for us, more advertising demands."

Eren couldn't seem to stop fidgeting, listening to Levi and watching and more and more passengers were boarding the plane. Within a few minutes, the pilot was greeting them all and announcing they were preparing for take-off. Flight attendants went over the cautions of evacuating the plane and Eren gripped his belt tighter. Damn, the kid was a ball of anxiety.

"Excuse me," Levi caught on the attendant's attention as she passed their row. "Can you bring us two gins?"

"Sir, we haven't taken off yet," she explained slowly as if confused by his request. Eren peered
between the two of them as they spoke.

Levi tilted his head. "I'm more than aware of that since we're still on the ground, but my partners a nervous flyer and could really use something to take the edge off," as Levi continued to explain this, he not-so-subtly slipped a large bill into her palm. "Do us a favor, would you?"

The attendant looked at the money in her palm and offered Levi a buttered smile, nodding her head. "I'll be right back with that, sir."

"Tch, idiot." Levi leaned back in his seat and sighed. "Like anyone can't see we're sitting on the fucking ground."

Eren wanted to laugh but felt a bit embarrassed, not expecting he'd be this nervous once he was on the plane. "You didn't have to do that, you know."

"I wanted to," Levi replied. "When I first got on a plane, I was a fucking mess. Drank myself stupid to make sure I knocked myself out. I don't do well with heights. After a few more times, it stopped bothering me. It'll be the same for you. Trust me, you're experiencing a normal reaction."

Eren was touched by how patient Levi was being with him. It made his chest warm. "Levi Ackerman, afraid of heights?"

"Shut up, brat. I could always knock you out myself."

This caused Eren to genuinely laugh and Levi's lips twitched into a small smile. When their drinks came and were placed in front of them, Eren reached for his first and waited for Levi to do the same. "Uh, cheers?"

Levi looked thoughtful before clicking his glass to Eren's. "Cheers."

Eren winced at the taste of the alcohol, knowing it was far too early to be drinking. But within a few minutes, the warm liquid helped fizzle out the striking pierce of his anxiety. He leaned back and stared out the window in wonder as the plane began moving an making it's ascent.

They arrived in New Hampshire around 1 PM and Levi was grateful to lead Eren off of the plane.
once they had the go ahead. In Levi's opinion, Eren handled the flight well. After they had taken off, Eren resigned to pull out a sketchbook and stare out the window toward the clouds. Levi watched him silently as he'd trace the paper with his pencil, noticing how much the simple notion seemed to calm the young man. They indulged in light conversation, not having more to drink after that one shot from earlier. Levi may have wanted to, but he needed to be presentable upon arriving.

The airport was far less chaotic than New York's busier one, so checking in and getting their luggage was much less of a hassle. They were able to spot one of the drivers waiting outside, Levi receiving a notification on his phone announcing their arrival. Ah, technology. There was a sleek looking town car sitting at the curb, the driver smiling and nodding toward him. "Mr. Ackerman?"

"That'd be me," he answered shortly. Eren stepped beside him, holding his suitcase close to him.

"I'll take those, sir. Leave your luggage to me."

Levi nodded, snapping the handle to his bag and handing it over. Eren did the same while Levi nodded his head toward the car. "Let's go, Eren."

They slipped inside of the car and made their way to the hotel Levi had personally picked himself. He wanted to make sure not only he was comfortable but most definitely thought of Eren's comfort as well. And he couldn't lie and say he didn't want to make use of the privacy of the room...

So many thoughts began swimming inside of Levi's mind at once while his eyes gazed at the excited man beside him, watching the way he was grinning and taking in their surroundings. Eren reminded him of an excited child, ready to explore. Levi inwardly smiled, happy to see him so enthused. It made his heart flutter in a way he'd never felt before.

"It's so pretty here..." Eren murmured quietly.

Levi nodded. "It's certainly... different from where we usually hold these conventions. I can't say it's not a much-needed change."

"You can see all of the signs of Spring here, flowers starting to come out and the trees blooming. I've always loved it. It's a bonus that my birthday lands at that time."

"Your birthday's coming up?" Levi found himself asking before he could stop.
Eren nodded, never taking his eyes away from the window. "Yeah, the end of the month. The 30th, actually."

Levi took a very strong mental note of this. It suited Eren's birthday to fall during Spring; he was a breath of new life.

It didn't take long before they arrived at their hotel, the car stationed in front of a large building with beautiful lights adorned around it. Even during the daytime, the lights stood out. Levi had a feeling it would look even more stunning at night. The driver walked around the town car and retrieved their luggage, offering to bring it to their room while they went ahead to check in. All the while, Eren was staring in awe. Eren had been to his fair share of visiting 5-Star, top of the line hotels. Given his line of work, it was nearly a given. But to be staying at one with someone he actually cared for, to experiencing this with him; it was an entirely different feeling. He hadn't left to the state of New York in years and being in a new place was refreshing.

There was a sense of calm around here, Levi realized and he knew Eren felt it too. The lobby was decorated in whites and golds; beige and tans. It was something Levi had become accustomed to at this point. A lot of the higher star hotels seemed to decorate the same, in his opinion.

Levi checked them in with relative ease, although, he could see the attendants eyes pass between Eren and him. Levi cocked a brow, giving the attendant a look that said, do we have a problem? With that look, he resigned to give them their keycards and told them to enjoy their stay.

"Oh wow," Eren murmured as they entered their suite. Like the lobby, the rooms were also decorated with golds and white. There was a splash of a deep emerald along the ridges of the walls and ceiling. The color reminded Levi of Eren's eyes, though he didn't think there was anything that could come close to the array of color in their depths. There was a large plasma that was mounted on the wall and a spacious kitchen and living area. There was also a desk in the far corner of the suite. The driver from earlier had already placed their bags inside when Levi let the door close with a click.

Eren removed his coat and placed it on the rack by the door, walking past Levi and looking around the room. Levi took off his coat as well while watching Eren glance down at the large, king-sized bed. He ran a hand over the comforter with a smile before throwing himself back onto the mattress, landing on his back with a content sigh. Levi rolled his eyes, fighting the fond smile that threatened to grace his features. "Just couldn't help yourself, could you?"

"Uh-uh, I don't think I've ever been in a bed this big. Or this comfortable. Or expensive. Let me enjoy this."
Levi moved his luggage to the desk and began sorting through it. While doing so, he ran a single digit along the surface of the wood. He couldn't help himself when he winced and found gray had spotted on his finger.

"Are you seriously checking for dust right now?" Eren asked from the bed.

Levi looked over his shoulder, meeting Eren's gaze. His head was turned in Levi's direction, watching him with mild amusement.

"You can't ever be too careful," Levi responded while pulling out one of his suits.

Eren snorted. "Coming from the man who said sometimes you can be too careful."

Eren let out a breath of laughter, closing his eyes. A dipping of the mattress caused his eyes to flutter open and meet the cool steel of Levi's gaze. Levi kept his hand beside Eren's head, holding himself above the escort. Their eyes were locked; unmoving. "Cheeky little brat, aren't you?" Levi murmured.

Levi couldn't help himself, his body moving on its own like a natural instinct had taken over. His eyes wracked over Eren's face, watching his lips twist in a playful smile. "Maybe I am, what're you going to do about it?"

Levi didn't hesitate as he swept down and claimed Eren's lips. Eren smiled into their kiss, chuckling deep inside of his throat when Levi traced his bottom lip with his tongue. Eren readily opened his mouth and moaned quietly, bringing a hand up to fist into Levi's hair. The brunette's legs were bent at the knees by the foot of the bed and Levi found himself slipping through them. Dammit, he couldn't get enough of Eren. His free hand found Eren's waist and pushed the shirt up slightly, massaging his fingers against the exposed skin of his hip. Eren groaned happily, pushing his hips forward to meet Levi's touch. He wanted it, practically craved it.

Without realizing how it had happened, Levi was moving above Eren's body, placing his knees on either side of the young escort's hips and began moving the hand that was occupied with his waist toward the other side of Eren's head. He felt Eren's fist clench tighter within the black locks of his hair and couldn't help the small growl that erupted from his throat. God, he couldn't stand it. It'd been weeks since he'd been with Eren like this. He was going to go insane if he didn't rip off Eren's clothes and just take him right then and there--
A shrill noise sounded inside of the room, causing Levi's head to snap up from Eren's lips. From across the room, one of their phones was ringing from their coats. They were both panting while the sound echoed noisily inside of the suite. Levi dropped his head with a frustrated groan and Eren could say it was the first time he'd ever heard such a sound leave the man.

"As much as I'd like to continue this..." he started slowly before sighing. "We still have things to prepare for before tonight. And that's my phone I'm hearing, so I know Erwin knows we're here."

Eren watched Levi pushed himself off of the bed while he propped himself up on his elbows. "Raincheck, then?"

Levi straightened his clothes and ran a hand through his hair, his gaze burning into Eren's. "You're damn right raincheck."

Eren pulled himself up from the mattress, straightening up and leaning to fix his mess of the sheets. "So what's on the agenda, then? I know tonight is a big deal, but is there anything we need to do before then?"

"We'll need to get our suits dry-cleaned, which shouldn't take long. We definitely need to eat since we skipped out on breakfast, which is not a request by the way. You need to eat. We'll probably meet up with Erwin and Hange... maybe a few other of my associates."

"That doesn't sound too bad. Is there anything I should be ready for as far as tonight goes?"

"Be ready to meet a shit-ton of people and shake hands. The building this is being held at is pretty large so based on the itinerary, I can tell you there will be a few hundred people showing up."

"Holy shit," Eren breathed.

Levi nodded. "We won't have to stay too long if it's too much for you. I just need to really be present to our company's presentation and to shoot the shit with a few of our companies sponsors."

Eren shook his head. "I'll be all right. I'll just... stay close to you."
Levi noticed an emotion that whirled behind turquoise eyes, unable to figure out exactly what it was. But Levi was drawn to it like a moth to a flame. He walked up to Eren and placed his arm around his waist, pulling him to him. "That's right," he assented, brushing his lips against Eren's. "Stay close to me."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter wasn't quite as long as I wanted it to be, but I felt right leaving it off where it did leave off. Next chapter has already been started and pretty much shows the entire party/convention. And I can say it's personally my favorite chapter, although I do enjoy writing all of them. :)

As always, feel free to hit that little kudos button or drop a comment to say hi and what you've thought of the chapter. I should have the next one up a lot sooner than it took to post this. Thanks again all, cheers!
The words ran through Eren's mind like a spreading fire, bringing heat to his face and a burning inside of his heart. He stared at himself in the mirror inside of the bathroom, his eyes gazing into his reflection with intensity. His hair was dripping on his face from his shower, slowly tracing down his neck and onto the counter. He leaned against it, his emerald eyes set. He felt something stirring inside of him and he couldn't quite place it. He felt a determination flare to life, causing his grip on the counter to tighten.

*I can do this, I know I can do this. Deep breath's, Eren. You've got this. You've done this with so many other clients before, this should be no different. Just smile and shake hands. Stay by Levi's side, he even told you to do so. It's only a few hundred people, what could go wrong?*

Eren wanted to laugh but forced it down, he removed the towel from his body and dropped it to the ground. His eyes were still on his image in the mirror, taking in and contemplating. *Why do I suddenly feel so insecure?* He pulled on a pair of boxer shorts and worked his way into his slacks. He rolled his black socks on beneath and reached for his button-up shirt. He slid it on with ease and mechanically twisted each button into place. He adjusted his sleeves with a flick of his wrists.

Tonight was a suit and tie affair. It made Eren more nervous as he reached along the bathroom counter and grabbed his suit jacket. He hefted it onto his shoulders and secured it snugly. Then, he grasped the tie that was at the edge of the tile and placed it at the top of his attire, folding it with precision. He went to wet his hands and applied styling gel inside of them. After a few minutes of silently adjusting and running his hands through his tousled hair, Eren gave himself a final nod of approval.

His phone that sat next to the sink began vibrating against the granite.

*The car will be there in 15 minutes. Meet me in the lobby when you arrive.*
Levi had left in advance, which hadn't surprised Eren in the least. He knew Levi and Erwin had a bit more of last minute details to go over. Eren didn't want to walk in there alone so he was grateful Levi would be waiting for him. Playing it safe, Eren retrieved the rest of his personal items and grabbed the keycard for the suite. He left the room and let the door click gently behind him. He took in a deep breath and strolled through the elegant hallways and past the main lobby.

When Eren stepped outside, he turned to admire the lights that wrapped around the building. It illuminated most of the street and was casting a soft glow on Eren's face. He smiled a bit to himself, admiring his surroundings while waiting. The air was cool but not harsh enough to cause shivering to which Eren was relieved since he'd been outside waiting for ten minutes before the town car pulled in front of him.

A driver stepped out, regarding Eren with a polite smile. "Mr. Yeager?"

"That's me," Eren answered with a short smile of his own. The driver made a move to open the door for Eren, but the chocolate haired man chuckled. "I've got it."

The driver nodded and made his way to the other side of the car as Eren slipped in, adjusting his attire and pulling the car into drive. "Beautiful night, isn't it?"

"It is," Eren joined in the small talk. He ran his hands over his knees as he glanced out of the window. "Happy to see Spring is around the corner."

"You and me both, sir."

Eren laughed softly, happy that their light chatting wasn't uncomfortable or overbearing. He knew his nerves were haywire and his stomach clenched. He wasn't sure what to expect even though Levi had gone into great detail about what their night would consist of. He was forcing himself with as much strength as he could muster to relax. When a comfortable silence fell on them, the driver looked at Eren through the rear-view mirror.

"We should be there in a few minutes, so just sit back and relax, sir."

Eren wanted to snort, wondering if his body language was that obvious the pleasant driver and he replied, "Thank you."
Eren's eyes were wide when they roamed over the building in front of him. It was stunning; white and grays on it's exterior with streetlights that were brighter than the stars overhead. Beautiful landscaping surrounding the front and small fountains on either side of the building. The walkway leading toward the center of the building was illuminated with small garden lights. Eren would have mistaken this for a manor if anything. The rock that was plummeting inside of his stomach seemed to intensify upon seeing where this convention was taking place. Eren had all of sudden felt very out of place.

"Would you like me to get the door for you, sir?"

Eren shook his head, his eyes never leaving the view. "No... that's alright," he murmured. He turned briefly to the driver, smiling softly. "Thank you."

He reached into his pocket, suspecting some sort of tip to be in order. The driver shook his head and chuckled. "That's been taken care of, sir, thank you."

Of course, it has. Eren nodded and placed the bills back into his pocket while exiting the vehicle. The driver said his goodnights and pulled away from his parking spot, leaving Eren to stand in front of this massive structure. He adjusted his jacket and began to advance forward. There were several people standing outside, talking idly with drinks in their hands. Eren strolled past them and walked through the main entrance.

The inside was just as lavishly decorated as the front, if not more. Sparkling chandeliers loomed above his head and he could see an adjoined room that was littered with table-clothed tables and several areas that catered scrumptious food. But the decorations were not what caught Eren's immediate attention; it was the massive amount of people that surrounded him. If his anxiety wasn't skyrocketing before, it certainly was now. A few heads turned toward him, curious and calculating gazes meeting his. He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to make his way through the lobby. Eren had attended many company parties and social gatherings in a business setting before, but tonight felt so different compared to those past moments. As Eren made his way around several people, he finally spotted a familiar face.

"Oh, Eren! Hi there!" Hange was standing next to a slightly taller man with hair slightly lighter than his. They had approached Eren quickly, giving him a tight squeeze and nearly knocking the wind out of him. Eren was startled for a moment and the man next to them sighed fondly. Unlike the Christmas party, Hange was wearing a slim deep maroon one-shoulder dress that met and flowed at her heeled feet. It complimented their curves rather well.
"Uh... Hello, Hange," Eren said when he regained some air. He patted their back awkwardly before Hange pulled away.

"Let's have a look at you! My, my, you gorgeous thing you! I could just eat you up!" They enthused with a large grin. Eren laughed a bit nervously but felt it could be a definite possibility they would eat him up.

"Calm down Hange," the person next to them chuckled. "You're scaring him."

"Am not! I'd like to think Eren and I know each other pretty well, don't we, dear?" He had almost missed the wink they had shot his way.

"Yeah," Eren replied before clearing his throat and smiling sheepishly. "Yes, we do. Sorry, you just startled me."

The man standing next to him smiled and offered his hand after Eren was released from Hanges drip. He was wearing a nicely tailored royal blue suit and ivory tie. "I'm Moblit, by the way. Otherwise known as this nut job's better half."

"Oh! Nice to meet you, I'm Eren." They shook hands and Hange wrapped their arms around Moblit.

"Bet you didn't think I could land such a stud muffin, huh? Anyone who lays eyes on him tonight had better watch out!" Hange sang that last part of their sentence and Eren's shoulders shook with an effort not to laugh when Moblit rolled his eyes.

*Levi wasn't kidding when he said they were insane. Speaking of Levi...*

"Hange, it's been great to see you. You wouldn't happen to know where Levi is, would you?"

Hanges eyes lit up. "Oh, of course! He should be somewhere around here. He's probably easy to miss since, you know, he's kinda sh--"

"Highly fucking suggest you don't finish that sentence, glasses."
Eren's head whipped around the deep voice behind him and he felt his heart flutter. *Oh, shit.*

Levi had left their suite well before Eren had a chance to see what he would be wearing for the evening, so Eren wasn't surprised to be caught off guard. He had grown used to seeing Levi in a variety of casual and formal wear but this was the first time the brunette had ever seen Levi dressed so... extravagantly. He was wearing a George Kruis all-white suit jacket over a white button-up shirt beneath it. The tie he wore was a solid black and it was a stunning contrast to his hair and silver eyes. His hair was slicked back just as Eren's was and it revealed more of the strong structure of his face.

*Oh, my fuck--* Eren couldn't take his eyes off of the raven-haired man, or seem to pay any attention to anything else around him. *Oh God, I'm staring, aren't I? Look away, Eren! Don't be an idiot!*

"Oh, hush. If you're allowed to get away with 'shitty glasses', I can certainly get away with calling you a shorty." Hange gave Levi a buttered smile.

Levi 'tched' under his breath and glanced Eren's way. His black cap-toed dress shoes clicked against the sleek tile under them as he approached Eren. Eren was stunned when Levi reached and tucked a loose strand of hair behind his ear. "Oi, you awake in there?"

Levi's brief touched brought Eren back to reality and he cleared his throat, stammering, "Sorry, I just... um," he tried and failed miserably. He wasn't even there for five minutes and he already felt embarrassed. "Wow, Levi, you look... amazing."

The executive chief looked slightly taken aback by the statement, but then a soft smirk graced his lips as his eyes roamed over Eren's form. "You clean up nicely yourself."

Eren forced down the heat that traveled to his face, clearing his throat again. "Thank you," he replied.

Hange squealed from beside them and Levi sighed heavily. "Look at you two! You're both just adorable! I should get some pictures before you two go running off!"

Moblit wrapped his arm around Hange, pulling them close. "Remember a while ago we talked about *not* invading other's personal space?"

"See? Even he has the right idea. Don't push your luck tonight, *shitty glasses.*"

Eren may have felt a bit embarrassed, but he also felt a slight tingle of amusement run through him. He chuckled quietly at the exchange and was starting to feel a little more at ease.

Hange threw their hands up dramatically in surrender. "Fine, fine. You all get your way for now. But I can't make any promises for later during the evening, *shorty.*"

Eren could see Levi's eye twitch and his jaw clench, but he said nothing in retort. He reached for his arm and began to lead him away from the larger masses of people. "Let's get away from them before they make good on their threat."

Eren nodded and allowed Levi to direct him where to go. He glanced around as they walked, taking in the variety of the crowd around them. "You look like you could use a drink," Levi commented as what appeared to be a waiter came around with a tray of glasses with a light cream liquid inside. The older man didn't hesitate as he reached and grabbed two of them, nodding his thanks. "Frankly, so could I. Here," he offered Eren.

Eren accepted. "Do I really look that obvious?"

Levi tried to hide a smile behind the rim of his champagne glass. "You look like you're about to shit yourself," he commented dryly.

The young escort huffed at that. "I'm trying, okay? You said this was a *convention*... but in all seriousness, this looks more like a *gala.*"

"Warned you, didn't I? Told you it was an outdated prom for adults. Erwin... well, he has a taste for the finer things in life. So planning anything with him would result in this. You remember the Christmas party," he stated more than asked.

Of course, Eren did. He remembered everything about that night in clear detail - even their shared moment in the limousine. At the thought, Eren hastily brought the champagne to his lips.
"You're doing fine," Levi told him. "It'll pass quickly. I'll shake a few hands, you can get buzzed, I give a presentation with the others, we leave."

"That... doesn't sound too bad," Eren admitted. He felt a warmth spread in his chest and head, knowing the alcohol was already beginning to get to him. He was easily considered a light-weight, so he made sure to pace himself. "I'm fine, really. Was caught off guard a little but I'm okay, I promise."

Levi seemed to accept that, taking another sip from his glass. His eyes narrowed slightly while looking at something distant. "Speak of the devil, here comes that eyebrowed beast now."

Eren turned and watched as Erwin approached them, wearing an exquisitely designed chocolate suit and sapphire tie. "I've been looking all over for you, Levi." He had turned briefly toward Eren and smiled genuinely. "Eren, You look wonderful. It's great to see you."

Eren anticipated a handshake, knowing this was a professional setting. He reached out and Erwin met him halfway. "Great to see you again, Mr. Smith."

"Please, Eren. I've told you many times that Erwin is fine. I hope you're enjoying yourself."

Eren chuckled. "Sorry, it's become a habit, I guess. And I am, I sort of just got here, though. This is incredible, sir."

Erwin's eyebrows rose before he laughed heartily. "Levi told me I may have gone a bit over the top this time."

_You think?_ Eren couldn't help but think while Levi shot him a look that said, _No shit._

"At any rate, a few other CEO's and I feel it's important to gather like this. Why not make it something worth enjoying?" Erwin explained while his lips held a soft smile. He turned to Levi. "I'll let you two get situated, but be ready in one hour for our presentations."

"Yeah, yeah. Got it," Levi waved him off as he gripped Eren's arm to lead him away.
"One hour, Levi!" Erwin called from behind them.

"One hour," Levi echoed back, scoffing. "Like I didn't hear him the first time."

Eren laughed breathlessly. "Keeps you on your toes, doesn't he?"

"He's a pain in my ass, is what he is. I'm the most punctual person in this company. He should be awa-- ah, fuck."

Levi noticed a heavy-set man with thinning hair on his scalp catching his gaze and he sighed. "Incoming, I've been spotted."

Eren glanced at Levi questionably, and then followed his gaze. A burly man in a suit that was extensively too small on him advanced toward them with a grin on his face. Eren swallowed nervously.

"His name is Reece," Levi explained in a hushed tone as he leaned toward Eren's ear. "He's the CEO of Dragonfly Graphics over in California and he's an arrogant son of a bitch. Flaunts his money around and is known for making outrageous purchases. Greedy bastard."

Eren nodded mutely, not sure what to say. He brought his champagne to his lips as a nervous reaction.

"He also designs lingerie for men in his spare time."

Eren had to force himself not to spit his drink out, swallowing awkwardly and nearly choking. What?!

"Levi, it's been too long!" The man, Reece, exclaimed as he reached to give Levi's hand a firm shake. "How has business been going on you and Erwin's end? I haven't spotted him yet," he continued.
"It's going," Levi shrugged.

Levi, Eren knew, forced himself to shake the man's hand. He could see the twitch on Levi's lips that were trying to form a scowl. *Filthy,* Eren knew exactly what Levi was thinking. It was incredible how a mere few months revealed so much about the man that he hadn't known before. While Levi and Reece conversed for a few moments, he was lost in his thoughts. He nearly smiled but was interrupted when he noticed a pair of beady eyes staring at him.

"And you are?"

"This is my partner, Eren," Levi replied cooly, his steel gaze meeting Reece's without hesitation.

Reece glanced at Eren and Levi, a slight confusion present and then he clapped Levi on the shoulder. Eren felt Levi flinch. "Partner? Look at you, Ackerman! Never thought you swung that way, you were always a ladies man! I remember that pretty wife of yours, so you'll have to excuse me if I'm a bit surprised!"

*Rude bastard,* Eren thought acidly. The man was loud enough for more than half the room to hear.

"Hah hah," Levi drawled tonelessly, shrugging Reece's hand off of his shoulder. "I know, right? Who would have thought? God *forbid.*"

Eren could sense Levi's edgy tone and he hoped for Reece's sake, he could as well. The man apparently was as pompous as Levi had explained and didn't seem to have a filter to his words. So, Eren laid a hand gently on Levi's, patting it shortly. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Reece. I've heard good things about you, particularly your *unique* line of menswear. I'm interested to hear more about it," he clarified loudly enough to make sure it was within the earshot of many.

Eren could *feel* Levi suppressing a smirk while Reece cleared his throat loudly. "Ah... well, I'm not quite sure what you're referring to--" he stopped himself from falling further into Eren's decoy. Instead, he reached and shook Eren's hand. "Please to meet you," he muttered.

*Try pulling that again, I dare you.* Eren challenged with his eyes.

Levi was able to cut the conversation off shortly after that, bidding Reece a farewell and him and Eren moving through the room once more. Eren's emerald orbs traveled to Levi, wondering if Levi
would speak more on the matter.

"He's in the closet," Levi offered bluntly. Eren mouthed an 'o' and nodded his head.

"Makes sense, I guess he tries to play off a... uh," Eren struggled to use an appropriate word.

Levi chuckled dryly. "You can say the word 'homophobe', brat. You'd be surprised how many people try to do the same. Don't know who the fuck he think's he fooling."

"Considering he designs lingerie for men. Speaking of which," Eren turned and faced Levi. "Thanks for telling me right before he approached us, I almost spit my drink in his face, you ass!"

There was a small shaking in Levi's shoulders as he tried to suppress himself from laughing. "He would've deserved it. That was a nice little stunt you pulled there, I'll give you credit. You're a clever little shit, aren't you?"

"He definitely had it coming. I'm not going to let anybody belittle you in front of me," Eren responded fiercely.

Clamping his mouth shut when he realized what had just tumbled from it, Eren could see Levi's sharp eyes intensely looking into his own. They were searching; gathering and it made the entire world around them still momentarily. "Much appreciated, but I can handle it. You already know when it comes to what people think of me, I don't give a shit. Especially not that nosy pig. If we weren't surrounded by people that contribute so much to Erwin's company, I would have punched his filthy mouth in."

It matters to me, Eren wanted to say.

Time was blurring together as Levi continued to have several different guests approach him, shaking hands or firm clasps of the shoulder and brief conversation. Eren continued to be introduced as Levi's partner and he felt a small swell of pride surge through him. After Reece, everyone else had been much more polite to Levi regarding their relationship. Or so, the relationship they were portraying. Wasn't that the whole point of their arrangement?

No, Eren thought quickly. This is different. You're here to make this right, to set things straight. Stop thinking like that.
So Eren continued to smile and nod, throwing in a few words here and there and then he and Levi would break away. It went on like that for quite some time until a shrill 'Levi' sounded behind them.

"Who's that? Please don't tell me they design lingerie as well. Or something worse."

Levi chuckled, "They're good friends from college, relax."

"Oh, thank God. I don't know how much more 'awkward' I can handle," Eren breathed.

Eren watched as a young woman came barreling toward Levi, throwing her arms around him. She had deep scarlet hair and wore an elegant forest green halter-dress that flowed toward her ankles. Levi didn't seem as discomforted by her touch as he had been with all their previous encounters, in fact, he seemed quite comfortable. His arms wrapped around the young woman and he sighed. "Didn't I tell you not to fucking run around like that? You almost had me on my ass."

"Sorry! I just haven't seen you in over a year!" The red-haired woman replied. Her deep green eyes opened and glanced around. "Farlan! I found him!"

A man, who appeared in a suit similar to Eren's, sighed and ran a hand through his dirty blonde hair. "Isabel, you can't just run around jumping on people like that. You're going to knock someone unconscious one day, I swear."

Isabel let go of Levi and stuck her tongue out at Farlan. "You're no fun, either of you." Her eyes soon found Eren and she smiled brightly. "Oh! You're Eren, right?"

"Uh," Was what slipped from his mouth. "Yes?"

"You're so cute! Levi, you found a good one! I approve," Isabel said rapidly, her bright grin hard to turn away from. "Hange told me all about you and she was right! You're adorable enough to eat."

_Oh no, Eren thought._
"Ah... thanks?"

"Isabel," Farlan sighed, shaking his head. "Sorry about that, Eren. She's easily excited over just about anything. You got a glimpse of that a few seconds ago when she jumped Levi. I'm Farlan, by the way. The three of us were pretty close when we went to school together. Now we live in Colorado and work at Regional Designs," he said.

"Eren," he replied shortly. "Nice to meet you. Sorry.. this is all a lot to take in. I'm meeting a lot of people tonight." He turned toward Isabel and offered a soft smile. "It's nice to meet you, too."

"Didn't I tell you Hange's dangerous? They're a horrible fucking influence, Farlan, make sure your wife stays away from them." Levi quipped while standing closer to Eren.

Eren laughed lightly at that and so did Isabel and Farlan. The air around them shifted into something much more comfortable and for that, Eren was grateful. He knew Levi had explained previously just how overwhelming tonight would be, but Eren was still easing his way into it. Catching a glimpse into Levi's world like this meant something to Eren so he knew he'd be alright. Levi didn't seem displeased with him or get upset at all during that hour so Eren hoped he was exceeding Levi's expectations. They decided after much time on their feet to take a breather and sit at the elegantly decorated tables by the catering area.

"How much time do you have before you have to meet Erwin?" Farlan asked.

"About twenty minutes, give or take. Enough time for me to get another drink in before I go in front of these assholes," replied Levi.

Isabel snorted while leaning against Farlan's shoulder. "You always have such a way with words," she remarked.

"I can go get you something," Eren offered as he stood up from his seat.

"I'll go with you," Levi insisted but Eren shook his head.

"It's fine, relax and catch up. I'll be right back." As Eren said this, he brushed his hand on Levi's shoulder as he walked past him. It didn’t go unnoticed that Levi smiled softly.
"Look how lovestruck he looks!" Isabel enthused happily after Eren had left their view. Farlan rolled his eyes.

"Shut the hell up," Levi replied shortly. He felt a strange heat blossom behind his cheeks and he fought like hell to make it go away. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"Bullshit, I don't! Farlan, look at him! I never thought I'd see the day Levi blushes."

Levi glared at Isabel and then at Farlan, daring him to say a word. Farlan held his hands up in defense.

"I have no part in this, though, I've gotta concede that's she's kinda right."

"Whatever," Levi groused while crossing his arms over his chest. Isabel was many things and Levi had to remind himself how perceptive she was. These were two of his closest friends, aside from Erwin and Hange, so it didn't surprise him how quickly they would pick up on what was going on between him and Eren. With the young man on his mind, Levi forced down another light smile. Eren was handling himself well, especially with the whole Reese ordeal. It didn't phase Levi, really. He'd long since accepted his sexuality a while ago. It didn't matter to him if someone was male or female; it was always how they presented themselves.

And Levi couldn't deny that Eren had struck him the moment he had seen him.

"How'd you both meet?" Farlan asked as he took a bite of one of the horderves he and Isabel had snagged earlier. "I know after everything with Petra... you weren't really interested in dating."

Levi had never really been interested in dating period. He'd had his moments where there was a sexual encounter here and there, but it was very rare before Eren. And of course, Eren was the only one who knew the truth that lied behind Levi and Petra's relationship.

"We met under... unusual circumstances," was Levi's vague reply.

"Oh, come on! We were looking for juicy details, not that half-assed reply," sighed Isabel.
Levi shrugged, smirking a bit. "Well, that's all you get since you're hanging out with shitty glasses. I can only imagine the chaos you two could cause with something as simple as that information."

Isabel pouted and shoved a piece of bread in her mouth, mumbling under her breath while Farlan just rubbed her upper arm. "At any rate... Good for you, Levi. He seems like a nice guy."

Levi nodded and stood up fluidly. "I'd better go find that nice guy before he gets fucking lost." Knowing how clumsy he is, he probably did. "I'll be back."

Levi didn't want to admit feeling slightly anxious when Eren didn't immediately return. He didn't need Eren there for when he and Erwin presented their latest projects for the quarter but he would have liked Eren to be present. Having the brunette near seemed to put him at some ease, whether Levi wanted to admit it out loud or not was entirely up to him.

After a few minutes of scanning the crowd around the buffet area, Levi finally spotted a familiar mop of chestnut hair. Eren was currently conversing with one of his associates, Mike, it seemed. He didn't see anything tense in the young escorts posture and for that he was grateful. He knew this was easily overwhelming for Eren but just as he had throughout the night, he continued to carry himself well. He was smiling politely while holding two drinks in his hand. Torquise eyes turned and met his own and Eren's smile brightened.

"There you are," Levi murmured quietly. He glanced at Mike and offered a short nod. "You've been making rounds too?"

"Non-stop," Mike answered. "Your friend was having a bit of trouble making his way around so I helped him a bit."

Tch, of course. Levi thought fondly. "Much appreciated, Zacharias. If you run into Erwin let him know I'll be with him in ten."

Levi liked Mike for the fact he didn't indulge in the bullshit small talk. He kept it simple, quick and to the point. The taller man nodded. "Right, will do. It was nice meeting you, Eren."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Zacharias," replied Eren.
When Mike had left the two of them alone, Levi sighed. "I hope he didn't do anything strange."

"No! No, he was actually really nice. He just... uh... I might have been imagining it but I thought I caught him smelling me, but I might just be tired."

Levi accepted when Eren offered him a drink. "You weren't imagining it, brat. He does that with everybody, so don't let it get to you. I'd love to say he's the most normal out of all of my associates but I would be fucking wrong."

Bright eyes filled with mirth at the statement. "You've got a colorful crew, I'll say that much."

"You're not fucking kidding," replied Levi as he sipped on his next drink. "I've got to hand it to you, you're doing a great job keeping your shit together. You being here has made this so much more bearable for me. Once I'm done with this, we'll say our goodbyes and get out of here."

Eren's fingers traced over the rim of his glass and he smiled. "I'm glad I could help. It's... a really helpful distraction for me, you know."

"I know it is," Levi's voice was softer when he stepped forward and placed a hand on Eren's slim waist. "I'm glad, I know you needed it. And if I remember correctly, we have a raincheck for tonight," he finished suggestively.

Levi's felt something stir inside him when Eren's gaze traveled upward, meeting his with an array of ferocity. "We do," he murmured. Eren leaned his face carefully toward Levi's, taking a chance of stealing one kiss from him before he'd go. As Levi moved to meet Eren's advances, someone had knocked into his back, causing both of their heads to thump together painfully.

"Shit!" Levi had exclaimed while Eren pressed a hand to his own forehead and muttered out an "Ow!"

"Oi! Watch it, shit-head!"

Eren had watched Levi whirl around, anger present on his features to address the idiot who had just knocked into them.
"I'm sorry, there's quite a crowd over here and I must have lost my footing," a strangely familiar voice said.

When Eren's eyes landed on the person speaking, his breath caught in his throat. He couldn't mistake the familiar dark hair, the faint traces of a mustache above his lips and the small goatee on his chin. He was wearing a crisp brown suit and black tie, similar to Erwin. Eren felt that stone that was in his stomach earlier that evening drop full force. Out of everything that he expected tonight, this was not one of them. Nile Dok should not have been here. It didn't make any sense to Eren why he was.

Eren's orbs went toward Levi, observing the way his lips tightened into a line. "Dok," he said.

"Levi, it's been how many years? Three, right? I don't think I've seen you since the funeral."

Levi didn't waste any time or let the last statement sink in. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

" Didn't you hear? My branch is funding some of the campaigns being presented tonight. I was invited, I assure you," he said easily, placing his hands on his hips. "I don't think that's a fair way to treat your guests."

"You aren't my guest, I assure you." Levi's tone cut like a knife.

Eren was steadily feeling uneasy, not sure if he should intervene or not. He knew Levi had a decent amount of self-control but at that moment, he wasn't sure if he should risk it. He didn't want Levi beating the man in front of all of these important people. So he placed a calming hand on top of Levi's clenched fist. Levi's sharp gaze met Eren's and briefly softened.

Levi hadn't seen the recognition that sparked to life inside of Nile's eyes but Eren did. He felt every muscle in his body stiffen when those eyes met his. "And who might this be?"

"None of your goddamn business is who," Levi retorted bitterly.

Eren knew without a doubt that Nile recognized him. And he was also toying with him but feigning indifference. It made Eren's blood boil and he also had to command himself to remain in control. If Nile wanted to pretend, then so be it. He would play along. He didn't want this man to destroy whatever equilibrium he and Levi had, no matter how confusing it was.
"It's fine, Levi." Eren soothed, removing his hand from Levi's and turning toward Nile. "My names Eren," he said shortly. When Nile extended his hand, Eren forced himself to accept it. His skin crawled when he touched the other man, memories of their last encounter running through his thoughts. If this night wasn't so important to Levi's company and overall career, he would pummel the man himself.

_I did say the next time I saw you, I'd show you the meaning of assault, you asshole. You're lucky._

Eren made sure he conveyed the thoughts with his eyes, meeting Nile's without hesitation. Nile seemed amused by the exchange.

"You know... I can't quite put my finger on it, but you seem familiar." Nile kept a firm hold on Eren's hand even when he tried to bring it back.

Eren smiled as politely as he could, trying not to grind his teeth in frustration. "I've been told I just have one of those faces," was his reply.

"That's enough," Levi interrupted, forcefully snatching Eren's hand and bringing it back into his own. "As much as I'd love to cut this conversation short... oh, well, there you go. We have other things to attend to," he gave Eren's hand a tug and the brunette complied, sensing the urgency in Levi's grip. "Let's go, Eren."

"It was nice meeting you, Eren."

Levi didn't turn around while he led Eren away, but Eren couldn't stop himself. He cast his eyes over his shoulder and mustered the most ferocious glare he could, emerald eyes shimmering with strong distaste.

Erwin and Levi's presentation went smoothly, though Eren never doubted it wouldn't. They went through several different campaigns and commercials, both television and web related, including the one Eren had helped Levi with himself. He felt a small sense of pride and had to hide his smile throughout. Several other companies presented as well, and Eren found it all fascinating and he was captivated by the art that was beneath advertising. Levi may not have appeared it, but he was exceptionally passionate about what he did for a living. He was an artist in his own right.

But Eren found it hard to focus, no matter how hard he tried. Most of the guests had moved to a separate room, not as obnoxiously decorated as the rest. There were several projection screens
around them along with several laptops and monitors. Eren sat among the guests, entranced by how clearly and professionally Levi spoke. Time went by rather quickly and before Eren knew it, people were standing from their seats and scattering around the large room.

When Eren tried approaching Levi and Erwin, he noticed they were engaged in several conversations. He didn't want to disturb them and took the opportunity to slip outside of the room and find a moment for himself. He noticed as he walked several guests were leaving an ajar balcony that overlooked the water and he didn't waste any time making his way outside. Fresh air would do him some good, given the long night he had endured.

Many people had cleared the spacious patio area, much to Eren's relief. It was vast in its size, adorned with beautiful potted flowers and wiry table sets. Eren's shoes clicked against the stone beneath them as he approached the railing. His eyes caught sight of several boats and yachts drifting quietly along the surface of the water splayed in front of him. It was... peaceful.

Sighing loudly, Eren leaned against the metal railing. He braced himself as he stared down at the water under him, his eyes heavy and tired. His mind was whirling with the thoughts of the night that had just transpired, heavily leaning toward the moment Nile Dok had shown up. Eren tried to shut it out, tried to remind himself why he was here. Nile was a setback, but he hadn't said anything and Eren was more grateful then he realized. The bastard could be toying with him for all he knew and he wasn't going to risk anything now that he had come this far with Levi. He had to be on guard; he had to be aware.

His inner turmoil wasn't nearly as bothersome as the anger that lined Levi's face upon seeing the man.

Eren knew Levi carried a great deal of guilt with him everywhere he went. He didn't know if his close friends knew, but he did. He wondered how often Petra had attended these gatherings with Levi. He wondered if she would smile politely the way he had, and shake hands with ease. It ached Eren's heart to know that Levi and Petra were pushed to such desperation that Levi insisted on marrying her. It shined a bright light on Levi's character as a human being. Eren was almost taken advantage of within a few minutes of meeting the Nile... he couldn't imagine being married to him would have been like.

Eren adjusted his shoes, irritated that his heels were beginning to become sore. He couldn't wait to leave. He felt exhaustion creeping into the corridors of his mind. It was just five past eleven, much to Eren's surprise. He hadn't realized how many hours had gone by during the entire affair of the night. Eren continued to stare out toward the harbor, steadily breathing.

Footsteps cut through the silence, shoes clicking against the floor. Eren closed his eyes briefly, already sensing who was behind him.
"Brat," Eren's body tensed pleasantly at the deep voice addressing him. He turned and looked over his shoulder to see Levi trudging toward him.

"Hi," Eren responded, leaning back over the railing.

Levi's breathing was soft and it cut through the silence. He approached the railing next to Eren saying, "This seems familiar, doesn't it?"

"How so?"

"You're hiding," Levi replied.

"Oh right, the Christmas party. And no, I'm not hiding," Eren insisted. "I just... needed a breather."

Levi accepted his answer, nodding and moving to lean beside him. He stared ahead and away from Eren, both of them settling into a deep silence. When seconds turned into minutes, Levi finally broke the ice.

He sighed and folded his arms in front of him. "I'm sorry for acting like that earlier with Nile, I should have had better self-control than that."

"You have nothing to be sorry for... I understand why you'd get angry. I'm angry for you," said Eren. That's partially why I'm angry, anyway.

"Don't be, what's done is done. He was certainly not someone I expected to see tonight, though."

*You and me both."

"I didn't like the way he was looking at you either. It was the same way he looked at Petra, skeevy bastard."
Eren forced his body not to tense, glancing to the side at Levi. "She was never... with him, was she?"

Levi met his gaze. "Briefly, but she got out quick. It isn't really an unknown fact that he's had several charges pressed against him."

*If that's the case then how did my company not know about it? They do thorough background checks. Since Nanaba was forced to let him hire again, there's a strong chance he'll assault someone else. Something just doesn't sit right with me on all of this...*

"Money, unfortunately, gives you a lot of power in this world, he more than likely threw a few bills to keep mouths shut. It's the only reason he still has the reigns on those chains of banks."

"That's... shitty," Eren admitted quietly. "Your friends... do they know about you and Petra's arrangement?"

Eren felt uncomfortable for asking, but Levi didn't scold him for it. "No, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Nodding, Eren turned back toward the water. "I would never say anything, I just wanted to know. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me. I'm sure that wasn't easy for you."

"You're... surprisingly easy to talk to, brat," Levi admitted softly.

Eren felt his heart starting to increase in tempo and he smiled.

Levi pushed himself away from the railing, rolling his shoulders as he did so. "At any rate, we're done here. We can say a few goodbyes and get the fuck out of here."

Eren felt relieved. "Thank God, I don't know how you handle doing this each year."

"With patience I wasn't aware I had," Levi chuckled. His steely gaze softened for a moment when he looked at Eren. "Having you here made it easier."
Levi was looking at Eren with an expression he couldn't quite place. It was almost tender. Eren took a small stride toward Levi until their chests nearly touched, their eyes boring into each other. Before Eren knew it, Levi was placing his hand behind Eren's neck and bringing his lips to his own. Eren heard Levi sigh softly when their mouths met as if a sudden wave of relief washed over him. Eren's eyes fluttered to a close, his arms encircling around Levi to bring him closer. He had wanted to do this all night and was anticipating more than he realized what was to come. He could have stood out there all night with Levi like this.

But Levi broke away from Eren's lips, breathing a little heavier than usual. His expression looked amused. "That worked out much better when our heads didn't fucking knock together."

Eren laughed gleefully, white teeth revealed in his bright smile. "That was a little embarrassing."

Levi exhaled a deep, amused breath. "It hurt too. Look at your forehead, you've got a nice bump on it."

"So do you," Eren pointed out. He reached and ran the pad of his thumb over the small reddening mark on Levi's forehead just beneath his bangs. His hand lingered in its place by Levi's hair, brushing his fingertips against the soft strands that fell between. There was a shift in the air around them, an aura that had presented itself. It felt like an eternity before either of them spoke.

"We should go," the raven-haired man said.

"We should," Eren couldn't agree more.

Eren hadn't been able to close the door fully before Levi pushed him against it, causing it to click loudly behind him. Eren's back pressed into the wood as Levi pushed him into place, his hips flush against Eren's. Levi's mouth was insistent on his, tongue caressing and teeth nipping. It caused Eren to gasp sharply, his hips moving against Levi's without even realizing what he was doing. Levi's hand's moved to cradle Eren's face, his mouth continuing its assault. It drew a pleasant whimper from Eren's throat and he reached to bury his hands in Levi's hair. He loved the feel of it against his fingers.

They were breathing heavily through their noses, their heads turning with the intensity of the kiss. Their hands couldn't settle into one place and they were roaming wildly over each other's forms. The very blood in Eren's veins blazed, never feeling this unbridled in his life. Levi was kissing him like a man starved; harsh and desperate. And his strong hands were touching his body like someone who had been deprived far too long.
Eren's mouth pulled from Levi's, gasping while searching Levi's suit jacket. "Where's your phone?"

"My phone?" Levi panted incredulously and Eren took pleasure in the cracking of his voice.

"Your..." Eren said breathlessly while fishing in Levi's pocket with clumsy hands. "Phone." When he finally found what he was looking for, Eren held the button alongside the device, successfully powering off the device. He kept his heated gaze on Levi's when he placed the phone on the counter beside him. "No interruptions this time."

Levi growled low in his throat when Eren reached for his tie, tugging him back to his lips.

They were steadily moving toward the bed, shoes being removed and hand's ripping at each other's clothes. Their jackets were removed and Levi untangled his lips from Eren's momentarily to say, "Sorry."

Eren's brows furrowed questionably but his eyes widened when Levi tugged his shirt open, buttons from it falling down by their feet. In truth, Levi wasn't actually sorry and Eren didn't seem to mind one bit. Matter of fact, Eren returned the same advances, pulling Levi's shirt open albeit not nearly as forceful. Levi didn't want to come off as aggressive but he couldn't help his rushed movements. He'd wanted Eren all damn day and now that he finally had him, he just couldn't control himself.

"S'kay," Eren breathed against him.

When they reached the bed, Levi turned Eren around and coaxed him gently. The brunette landed on the soft comforter, gasping when Levi moved above him and pressed his body into his. Their hips were aligned just right and it sent sparks through Eren's stomach and length. Holy shit, Eren's mind screeched when Levi rolled his waist against him. A low moan rumbled from Levi and Eren took full advantage of his mouth again. His hands, shaking with anticipation, reached for Levi's belt and began removing it. He slipped it from the loops of his slacks and pulled it free. Levi got the message quickly, moving his own hands to remove the offensive clothing and kick it off to the floor. He wasted no time in removing Eren's trousers, wanting to feel that heated skin against his own.

Levi felt small tremors throughout his body and realized Eren was trembling beneath him, his legs wrapping around Levi's waist and dragging him forward. A wild sound escaped Eren's mouth when their erections pressed together and Levi let out a soft moan of astonishment escape him. He could already feel his hair damp against his skin and a flush traveled over his body. He'd never felt himself react so quickly before.
He could've come from the sight of Eren right there, but he knew he didn't want this to end so soon. Levi attached his lips to Eren's neck, suckling against the sweet and salty skin beneath while his hands wandered and splayed against the chest of the other. His fingertips traced along the contours of his nipples and dragged along his abdomen. He felt Eren quiver under his touch and he placed open-mouthed kisses behind the trail of his fingers.

Eren's breathing was sporadic; irrepressible as Levi dragged his mouth and tongue along his form.

"Levi..." Eren had moaned, his fingers reaching for Levi's hair as he descended down his body.

Eren's voice tore through him like a raging fire, burning and consuming Levi whole. He dragged his teeth along the other's skin before stopping at his cock. He stroked the heated flesh, rewarded with a sharp noise from Eren. Eren had raised his head, looking at Levi expectantly as Levi licked the strip along the underside of his length. Eren's head fell back against the pillows, a strung-out sound escaping his lips. Eren's bright eyes fluttered in pleasure while Levi brought his mouth down completely on his erection. The hands that had been traveling down the young escort's frame now rested against his hips to keep them in place while Levi's mouth sucked vigorously.

Eren felt his release building strongly just from a few moments of Levi's mouth on him. He didn't want this to end yet, not yet dammit. He lifted his head and his ocean orbs watched as Levi ran his tongue over the tip of his cock. It was too much. Levi would remove his mouth momentarily to kiss and nip his inner thighs, leaving scorching marks in his wake. Eren wanted more. Eren wanted him.

The brunette reached and placed his hands on either side of Levi's face, successfully getting the other man's attention. Eren's cock slipped from his mouth and Levi allowed himself to be brought back to Eren's lips. Eren tasted himself on Levi's tongue as they prodded against each other. While they kissed, Eren took the opportunity to firmly wrap his legs around Levi's waist and he heard a surprised sound when he used his strength to flip them over.

Levi glanced up at Eren through hooded eyes, silver striking in the dark room. Eren smiled down at him, experimentally rolling his hips against other. Eren could feel a strong sense of accomplishment on catching the man off guard, Levi's eyes dancing to a close at the feel of Eren moving above him. Eren was prepared for this, reaching down for a short moment to retrieve the bottle of lubrication inside of his pants that were discarded on the floor. He brought the bottle into Levi's view, holding it in a tantalizing manner.

"Would you like to do the honors or should I?" Eren didn't recognize the coy voice dripping from his lips.
Levi looked thoughtful as he stared at Eren's fingers. "Let's see what you've got."

Hotter words had never been spoken, in Eren's opinion. He had never really explored himself in this way before. But for Levi, he would. He spread a generous amount of the substance on his fingertips, rubbing them together to ensure they were coated properly. His blazing eyes were on Levi's when he reached behind his backside and slid one finger inside.

*Hot*, Eren's mind supplied as he ran his finger along his inner walls. He felt his body responding and clamping along his intrusion but he forced himself to relax. It was a burning sensation that Eren couldn't explain. He had had this done to him several times but there was something exquisite about watching a person becoming undone just by watching *you*. Eren felt a keen whine leave his lips as he worked himself open and soon, he pressed a second finger in. He scissored his fingers apart, trying to make sure he was stretched. It felt so *good*. His eyes were closing and then opening, looking toward Levi in an impulsive way. Levi was staring at Eren, eyes unwavering as he watched Eren prepare himself. Levi's eyes nearly dilated when Eren brushed over that bundle of nerves that had his toes curling on either side of Levi's calves and a throaty sound releasing.

When he added the third digit, Eren felt Levi squirm.

"Stop," Levi ordered hoarsely. The older man leaned forward, pushing himself up with his hands. He grabbed Eren's hand and removed his fingers from his backside. Chestnut hair obscured Eren's vision as he felt Levi running his hands along his ass, dragging his nails along the skin of the globes. Levi gripped his own length, spreading lubricant on it before lining it up to Eren's entrance. He braced an arm around Eren's shoulders as he began slipping into the tight heat.

Eren couldn't control the noise that escaped him; it was a rippled moan.

Levi nibbled along Eren's jaw as he pressed further into him, a tingle of pleasure shooting through his senses. Eren wrapped his own arms around Levi's upper body, clinging as he began to push against the raven's hips. Levi began thrusting upward when Eren seemed adjusted, keeping one arm firmly in place behind him while the other reached down and placed itself on Eren's hip. They had been together so many times; *countless* times, but Levi had never felt so close to Eren before in his life. The escort panted next to his ear, dropping occasional kisses along his neck as Levi's thrusting became earnest. Eren's hair tickled his shoulder, heightening his already warm senses.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck*, Levi's mind raced.
Eren was meeting him with each upward movement, bringing his body down in a demanding way. Levi felt that familiar tightening in his lower stomach, that warning that this would be over soon. Neither wanted it to end-- not yet.

"What do you want, Eren?" The words left Levi's mouth on their own accord, reflecting what his heart wanted to say. Months of confusion and wanting.

Eren pulled back, his hips never faltering in their movement. Ocean eyes studied storming gray. Eren's nails dug into his upper back when he answered, "You."

Levi nearly stopped thrusting, his eyes never wavering from Eren's. His answer resonated; bellowed. Eren's breath hitched when he said again, "You... I-I want--."

Levi's control snapped, his heart aching as he overturned Eren and pushed him against the bed underneath. Eren gasped when Levi withdrew from his body and then drove back in. Levi watched as Eren writhed below him, his back arching and his legs tightening around his hips. He was meeting Levi's powerful movements in vigor; seeking the release they both desperately needed from each other. Levi couldn't help but stare at him. His eyes glazed over with lust and... something. His hands rose above his head to seek refuge from the onslaught of pleasure coursing through his as Levi continued to snap his hips against him, gripping the sheets and twisting them into whitened fingers.

"Levi-- ah, yes!" Eren cried out when Levi reached between them and gripped his cock, stroking in time with his erratic movements. Eren's neck craned as he arched, his eyes closing and his teeth gritting together. Levi dove down, unable to resist the line of his neck that was exposed. Eren couldn't take anymore, didn't want it to stop, and he felt like everything around him was shattering like glass.


One of Eren's hands reached and grasped behind Levi's neck, nails clawing behind the undercut and causing Levi to hiss. Eren shuddered and came with a cry that caused Levi's insides to tighten, a wave of crippling indulgence piercing through him as those walls gripped him. A strained groan left Levi as he released. Levi watched as Levi fell beside him, his breathing breaking the silence in the room. Eren tried to control the unsteady noises leaving his mouth as he gazed up at the ceiling. At that moment, Eren knew and his heart sang it. I love you.

After a few minutes, their breathing quieted and the room fell into silence. Eren tried to turn over but Levi's touch stopped him. "The hell you think you're going?"
Levi's tone was light and lazy as he pulled Eren into his arms. Eren smiled softly in the dark as Levi placed a soft kiss on his lips, warm and calm. Eren's eyes were fighting to stay open and he heard Levi sigh quietly next to him. They had never held each other like this before, Eren realized. After any sexual encounters, they'd usually sleep with their backs to each other. Eren reveled in the feel of Levi holding him and laid his head on the chest of the other.

Eren fell asleep to the rhythm of Levi's heart.

Chapter End Notes

All I can say is THIS CHAPTER TOOK FOREVER.

REASONS: I'm pretty sure this is the longest chapter in the story. Secondly, the dialogue is really what stumped me because there was so much of it. I don't have an issue with writing dialogue but hot damn, this chapter gave me a hard time. I hope it met your expectations. This was probably my favorite chapter even if it was the most difficult to write.

SO, next chapter is in the works and all I can say is...

... stuff happens.

As always, thank you for sticking with me and being patient. Your comments and kudos are so insanely appreciated it's not even funny. Feel free to hit that little heart or drop a comment and say hi!!

Oh! I was also considering writing an 'The Last of Us' AU. It would feature Levi and Eren, of course. I saw a piece of fanart on Tumblr and I was inspired pretty fast. I think I may go for it. We shall see!

Thanks again and see you next chapter!
Levi had always been an early riser, especially since he hardly slept as it was.

Bleary eyes were blinking open, soft light entering through the window of the hotel suite. Levi groaned quietly and ran a tired hand over his face. It had been almost a week since he had slept so soundly. His mind knew he needed to get up but his body had other plans. He had to meet Erwin and Hange for a few conferences, as much as he was dreading the idea. His limbs refused to move and the warmth of the bed had drawn him into simply laying there. Realizing the source of that warmth, Levi felt it spread through his chest as he gazed at Eren's sleeping form.

His face was slack in his sleep and his mouth was open slightly, one arm cradling his pillow underneath while the other was resting in front of him. He was laying on his side and the comforter draped by his hips, revealing the definite curve of his body. His hair was a mess, sticking up at the most awkward angles possible. It made Levi smile, reaching out his hand to run it through the chocolate strands. Eren sighed softly in his sleep when Levi touched him.

Levi couldn't explain the feelings that were washing over him. The night they shared together was unlike any of their previous encounters. Last night felt different; it felt special. When they reached each other behind closed doors, neither of them wasted a second before they were on one another. Their hands were moving in a frenzy and they couldn't seem to get enough. And Eren's words didn't fail to replay in his mind over and over again.

*Throws jealous Levi and angst at you and then hides*

Also a warning of some non-con themes later in the chapter.

*Hides again*

Follow me on Tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You. I-I want--
Eren wanted him.

Levi could forget the convention, he could forget seeing Nile Dok face to face again, he could forget all of it. He could forget that this was a private arrangement between him in Eren, for both physical release and the notion that they were together. He could forget the real reason this had all started was that everyone could see right through him and it took him so long to realize how empty he truly was. He could forget that Eren probably slept with dozens of men like him. But those words, those words that were uttered in the heat of a passion they had shared together was not something Levi thought he could ever forget. Nor did he think he wanted to. Levi may have been good at reading people, but when it came to his own feelings, he was always lost. But he couldn't deny that this something, which it had certainly been at one time, was starting to become everything.

And it scared the shit out of him.

Levi's hand moved from petting Eren's hair to gently rubbing the pad of his thumb against his cheek, astonished at the way Eren leaned subconsciously into his touch. His stomach ached and he couldn't decipher if it was an actual ache or an ache of wanting.

Levi cocked his head to glance at the clock, the digits reading 7:14 AM. It was later than Levi actually realized, or time slipped when he was lost in thought. Either way, he had to leave the bed and start getting himself together. Slipping the covers off of him and delicately moving to avoid waking Eren, Levi stood up and padded toward the bathroom. He could feel the remains of the sticky mess from last night on his stomach and his nose scrunched in distaste. They had both fallen asleep quickly after what transpired so he wasn't surprised a mess was left behind. He'd make sure to later get the sheets changed.

Levi had showered and dressed quickly, not wanting to drag out his meetings for very long. As he stepped out of the bathroom, he noticed his phone was still sitting on the island counter connecting to the kitchen. Remembering Eren had turned it off made Levi chuckle to himself, pressing the side button to power it back on. He slipped it into his pocket without checking it. He didn't need to wear anything formal today, thank fuck. He was getting tired of suits and uncomfortable shoes. He wore a simple black long-sleeve shirt and black trousers. He'd have to wear a small jacket over it since the temperature outside seemed to be low in the morning. He slipped on a more comfortable pair of round toe shoes and walked back over to where Eren was still sleeping.

Eren's back was to him from where he was standing but Levi could see the rise and fall of his body. He didn't want to wake him up, but he also didn't want to leave without letting Eren know. When Levi glanced at the clock again, it was already nearing 8 AM. Levi resolved himself and leaned down to gently shake the sleeping brunette.

"Brat," he murmured quietly. Eren had merely stirred but didn't wake, mumbling something under
his breath while burying his face further into the pillow. Levi sighed, shaking Eren with a bit more force. "Eren, I need to leave."

Eren moved this time, slowly sitting forward while rubbing his tired eyes with the heel of his hand. "Time's it?" he slurred.

Levi had to force himself not to smirk, Eren was fucking adorable when he was in a sleepy state.

"Early," Levi replied quietly. "I have a few things I need to do and there's really no reason for you to go with me. You look like you could use more sleep."

Eren looked up toward Levi, sleep still very evident in his features. "Are you sure? I don't mind going with you."

Levi shook his head. "There's no need. You got through the shitty part, now you can relax. After this is done, so will I. We'll go out to dinner tonight, not as an obligation but a way to wind down."

"Okay," said Eren. He smiled tiredly at Levi. "I can't lie and say I'm not still exhausted."

"I bet," Levi offered. That smile made Levi want to crawl back into bed and say fuck it to everything else. "I'll be back by afternoon hopefully. You can sleep, order room service, go around town for all I care."

"Hmm..." Eren hummed. "Sounds pretty tempting. I'm also still half-asleep, so anything probably would go for me right now."

Anything? Dammit, this little shit is too much right now.

"I'll see you later, then," Levi said while turning on his heel to leave. As he walked toward the door, he found himself stopping. He couldn't explain why his body pivoted and walked back toward the bed. Eren looked up at him questionably but let out a soft noise of surprise when Levi leaned down and sealed their lips together. Eren was still when Levi cupped the side of his face, his mouth massaging against his own. But soon he relaxed and returned the pressure.
When Levi pulled back, he seemed thoughtful before smirking. "Your breath smells terrible."

Eren gawked at him and Levi couldn't lie and say the blush that crept on Eren's face wasn't adorable. "Does it really? Shit, I forgot to brush my teeth last night!"

Levi's eyes were dancing with amusement and Eren noticed even in his tired state. "Oh, ha, ha. Charming as always, you ass."

"I'd like to think I am charming when I want to be," said Levi, his smirk turning into something warmer.

Eren laughed breathlessly. "When you want to be."

Levi hummed quietly, leaning to kiss Eren's lips again. "I-I thought you said my breath smelled."

"Looks like I'll make an exception for you."

The kiss was gentle; chaste with just a small pressing of their lips. Levi wished he had time to actually show Eren just how much of an exception he really was. When they parted, Levi said, "I really need to go."

"Go then," Eren responded while flopping back down on the bed. "I'll enjoy this unfairly comfortable bed while you're stuck in your meetings."

"Rubbing it in my face, you brat?"

Eren grinned. "Maybe just a little bit."

He heard Levi chuckle while walking away from the bed and out of the suite. When the door clicked to a close, Eren laid silently for a few moments before turning over and pressing his face against his pillow. The smile that split across his lips was enough to make his cheeks hurt.

Eren decided to take Levi's advice and stay in bed for a majority of the morning, enjoying the way the expensive sheets felt against his skin. The night prior had proven to render him useless for a few
hours. He eventually ordered room service, his stomach growling in demand for something to eat. He settled for eggs and toast, nothing too fancy and ate in the bed. He knew if Levi were there, he would have scolded him. While he sat there, covers pooled around his hips and idling chewing on his toast, his mind wandered to the night before.

He could feel with every shift of his body a slight trickle of pain that would travel up the small of his back, sending a pleasant shiver through him. He tried not to smile like an idiot as he chewed, but he couldn't help himself. Last night was... different. Intimate, if Eren wanted to dare believe it. But he did. At the beginning of their arrangement, sex was just that; sex. It was a quick roll in the sheets and nothing was ever said afterward. As the months went by, Eren hadn't noticed just how quickly their acts of intimacy changed. Reflecting back to last night, however... Eren was happy to finally understand just how much their relationship had evolved.

Eren wanted to believe there was more there; had to believe it. He remembered just how fervent their touches were and how tender Levi's eyes had been.

Tonight, I'll bring it up tonight. He said we were going out for dinner... I can tell him then. That I... love him.

Another thought lingered though, one not as pleasant as the last. And it was the image of one son of a bitch named Nile. As his mind backtracked to him, he suddenly felt a loss of appetite. He took his toast and tossed it back on the plate to place on the nightstand. He placed his head in his hands and took a deep breath. Eren tried to convince himself that Nile may have been considerate and left out the fact they knew each other, but he doubted it. Nile was toying with him or even Levi, possibly both. It made his teeth grind together in frustration. It didn't make any sense why he chose to pretend he didn't know him.

But he didn't dwell on it, as Levi said the night before, what's done is done. He was here only one more day and then they'd be flying back to New York in the morning. From there... Eren wasn't sure. He hoped it would be good strides toward having an actual relationship with Levi and not just one as escort and client.

With that final thought, Eren dragged himself out of bed and into the bathroom. He felt delightfully sluggish as he flicked the lights on and gazed at himself in the mirror. He couldn't deny it, he looked a mess. It was a surprise Levi even kissed him that morning. As Eren continued to stare, he heard a buzzing coming from the other room. Realizing he hadn't bothered to look at his phone since he arrived at the convention, he quickly strode back into the large suite and retrieved where he had left the device on the nightstand.

"Holy crap," Eren breathed. He had almost six missed calls from Mikasa. One from Annie and another from Armin. Chewing on his lower lip, Eren swiped his phone and checked his messages.
He was expecting Mikasa to blow up his phone but not to this extent. He began wondering if something was perhaps going on with his mother or if something else happened. If he called her and nothing was wrong, he knew he'd be roped right into explaining his every move over the past twenty-four hours. Playing it safe, Eren scrolled and tapped on Annie's name.

One, two rings and Annie answered with a soft, "Hello?"

"Hey, sorry is it too early?" Eren cast his eyes toward the nightstand and it read 9:36 AM. Not entirely too early, but it was a weekend.

"No, it's fine," Annie sighed. "I take it Mikasa is calling your phone non-stop?"

"I hadn't realized it until this morning, my phone was on vibrate. Is... everything alright?"

"Mikasa came by here last night looking for you, luckily Reiner and Bertolt were working so I just said the three of you went out. She seemed okay with that, even stayed for a while to talk. Your moms okay, if that's what you're worried about."

Eren's shouldered sagged with relief. "Good... that's sort of what I was worried about. So in other words, Mikasa is just being her over-protective self."

"That's what I'm gathering at any rate," Annie responded while making some minor background noise. It sounded like she was moving dishes around.

"Okay, that's... that's good then."

There was a quiet pause before Annie spoke again. "Is everything okay on your end?"

"Yeah... great, actually. I'll fill you in on the details when I get home. I'm going to go explore the city a little bit before Levi gets back," he explained. He was sitting down on the bed again, realizing he was just standing there naked. "Thank you again for doing this, Annie. I owe you."

"Don't worry about it. Keeping Mikasa off your back is hardly a favor, just try not to make a habit of it. She'll eventually catch on."
"Will do, alright, I'll talk to you soon."

Annie murmured a quiet 'bye' and Eren disconnected the call. He stared down at his phone for a while, contemplating what to do with himself. It was still early and he didn't want to lay in the bed all day even if it was sort of tempting. Maybe exploring the town wasn't a bad idea; he was in a completely new state after all. He may as well take advantage of it. Deciding showering and straightening up was a good first step, he pushed himself off the bed and made his way back into the bathroom.

Manchester was a quaint little city compared to Manhatten and it was beautiful in its own right. It was cleaner and the people were friendly. Eren decided to walk instead of using a driver, taking an opportunity to explore without someone being with him. There were unique stores and wonderfully charming café's and restaurants lined along the city streets as well as food and item carts on the side of the roads. Potted plants and flowers were placed beside the street lamps that were decorated for Spring.

The sun was shining brightly and Eren had forgotten to bring sunglasses with him. He shrugged it off, too much in a pleasant mood to let it get to him. He wore an army green short-sleeved shirt and gray denim jeans. He had a light black jacket above it all but wrapped it around his waist after an hour of exploring. With the sun directly on him, it made it uncomfortable to wear the jacket any longer. It was the first time he'd felt warm in quite a while.

As he walked down the city sidewalks, people would smile politely and wave. You didn't get that sort of a kindness and New York, so it caught Eren off guard a bit. After a few times of it happening, Eren found himself smiling brightly and waving back. It was... nice.

Several stores caught his eye but there was one specific art and supply store with unique items displayed in the front that really grabbed his attention. Unable to stop himself, Eren crossed the threshold and stepped inside. It was a quiet shop with several panels lined with different styles. There were sections for drawing and painting, ceramics and sculpting, photography and conceptual art. Eren felt like he was in heaven. It wasn't as if he really purchased much for himself beside the essentials he needed for his garage and school.

Deciding to give in to a little self-indulgence, Eren browsed and purchased whatever struck his fancy. He bought a few new carving tools, as well as rasps that he knew, were wearing thin. When he moved to pay for his items, something caught him from the corner of his eye. When he turned, he saw a display case on the other side of the store with several ceramic and stone sculptures and knock off trendy items. He placed his items on the counter and said he'd be right back, walking over to the case and examining what was inside.
"Wow," Eren mumbled. He already knew they were knock-offs of some of the original works but it didn't make them any less beautiful. He definitely intended to take one with him. There was one particular piece that Eren realized he had to have after several moments of searching. *The Kiss*, an original work from Constantin Brancusi in 1912, was secretly one of his favorite pieces of art. It was a romantic piece and for that reason, it instantly made him think of Levi.

Levi, as Eren said, was an artist in his own right. He enjoyed the fact that Levi shared a bit of knowledge when it came to sculpting and remembered Levi collected some of the artwork himself. With his mind was set, Eren walked back over the counter and asked the cashier, "Can I purchase one of the pieces in your case?"

It was expensive but it was worth it. He hoped Levi would appreciate the meaning behind it and that thought alone made Eren flush a little. The cashier smiled at him, thanking him for his purchase after wrapping the stone piece and wishing him a good day. Eren walked out of the store and reached into the bag the item was in, he unwrapped it carefully and ran his fingers over the stone surface with a soft smile.

Levi drummed his fingers on the conference table, his face lined with boredom. When he gazed up at the clock on the wall, it read 2:17 PM. He was supposed to be done with this shit and spending time with Eren. A few of the other CEO's didn't seem to know how to shut their damn mouths, though. Spewing unnecessary information in regard to the next quarter. Blah, blah, blah, nobody gave a shit.

He heard Hange sigh next to him and knew he wasn't alone, this was supposed to be their free day, after all.

Absorbed in *trying* not to look as annoyed as he felt, he stiffened when his phone vibrated in his back pocket. He reached as discreetly as he could and made sure Hange wasn't staring at him. He swiped the screen and read the message from Eren.

'Have you made your grand escape yet?'

Levi was quick to reply, happy for the distraction.

'No, still fucking sitting here. Ready to bash my head against the table.'

He contemplated if that was a good enough answer, so he added, 'Sorry this is taking so long, I hope you've kept busy.'
Levi kept his phone on his lap and would occasionally look up to pretend he gave a damn. His phone vibrated against after a minute passed.

'That sucks! And no worries, I slept in, ate, and went out into the city. Which is really nice, by the way!'

Levi chuckled under his breath, seemingly forgetting he was still in a room full of executives and associates as he replied, 'Glad to hear it. I should be done soon and then we can get some dinner. Hope you don't mind that Erwin, Hange, and Mike will be there. Probably Farlan and Isabel too. If it's too much, I can always say we have other plans.'

'No! That's fine. I at least know all of them and it's not like we'll be surrounded by hundreds of people again. I know you don't see Farlan and Isabel often. I'm sure it'll be nice.'

Levi was glad for the response because Eren was right, it was a rarity that he could spend time with his friends.

'They took a liking to you, by the way.'

It took several more minutes for Eren to reply, 'I think Hange and Isabel like me a little too much, Levi.'

Levi couldn't stop himself, he let out a snort of laughter at the message. Everyone in the room looked at him, including the current speaker, and he clamped his mouth shut, slowly putting his phone back in his pocket. He cleared his throat and said, "I apologize, please continue."

Erwin sighed from the other side of the room while Hange brought their hand up, snickering behind their closed fist. Levi shot them a glare and kicked their feet beneath the table in warning. Levi didn't check his phone again.

Later that evening, while Levi was still getting changed for dinner, Eren sat on the bed in their suite and waited. On his side, he noticed it. Right there on the night table. A check with his name and Levi's signature. Eren reached for it and held it between his fingers, staring at it with a frown. He didn't know how many minutes had past but when Levi emerged from the bathroom, he hastily shoved the check into his side pocket.

Levi asked, "Ready?"
Eren nodded and waited for Levi to turn and walk out of the room first. When he did, Eren reached into the bag placed on his side of the bed. He moved quickly, taking out the sculpture he had purchased earlier and placed it on the spot the check had been. Underneath it was a small note and Eren hoped Levi understood the meaning behind what he wrote. He'd find a bit of pleasure in catching Levi off guard, but art was a beautiful form of saying how you felt without words.

Eren nodded to himself and walked out the door behind Levi.

Dinner was a much more comfortable affair than the night prior. The restaurant was more casual, the atmosphere busy but relaxed. It reminded Eren of Rose and Maria Bar. Levi and Eren had arrived later than everyone else so there was already a table ready for them. Erwin, Hange, and Mike sat on one end of the table while Isabel, Farlan, and Mike said at the other. Levi and Eren sat together in the two seats left open for them. They ordered food and indulged in some cocktails, which helped Eren ease some tension. He didn't have any reason to worry, though. He was conversing easily and smiling brightly next to Levi, who would occasionally place his hand against his knee or brush his shoulder against his own.

"I don't care what you say, Levi, I'm getting pictures this time!" Hange said while reaching into their bag. Moblit rolled his eyes next to them.

"I'm sure there were enough pictures taken last night, Hange," Erwin said with amusement. He cast a glance at Levi who was glaring at Hange.

Isabel was reaching into her own purse. "Don't worry Hange, I've got your back. They're too cute to not take pictures."

Eren groaned while sipping on his cocktail, Levi shaking his head and saying, "Told you their a horrible fucking influence, Moblit and Farlan, control your spouses please."

Farlan snatched Isabel's phone, causing her to pout pitifully and Hange to sigh a dramatic sigh. Mike snorted to himself and Erwin chuckled openly.

Eren had to hide a small smile behind his glass at the fact he felt like he belonged in Levi's world like he somehow just fit right into place with his associates and friends. It felt gave Eren a warm feeling inside, his heart swelling inside his chest. He felt Levi's eyes on him and Eren met his gaze and his smile widened. At that moment, a flash caught their eyes and they directed them toward Hange.
"Ha! Got it!" Hange sang.

"I'm going to break your shitty phone," Levi muttered and Eren started laughing earnestly. It seemed his laughter was contagious because soon, everyone was bustling with unhindered hilarity.

"One picture won't hurt," Eren soothed.

"Come on, shorty! You wouldn't let me indulge last night while you both were dressed so nicely, live a little!"

"I hope you enjoyed yourself last night, Eren. It was certainly nice of you to join us this year," Erwin steered the conversation elsewhere, hoping to avoid another bout between Levi and Hange. Albeit, it was always playful. But one could never be too careful with those two.

Eren finished chewing on his piece of chicken before answering, "I did. It was... definitely interesting."

"Overwhelming, I'm sure. But everything went smoothly. I'm sure it had something to do with you being there for Levi."

"I'm ordering more drinks from the bar," Levi said abruptly as he stood up. Eren couldn't mistake the small bit of red that stained Levi's cheeks and he had to stop himself from grinning like an idiot.

"Oh dear, I think you embarrassed him, Erwin," Hange giggled.

"Second time in two days I've seen that man get all hot and bothered, I gotta say, it's kinda funny," said Farlan.

"It's cute!" Isabel corrected. She turned his emerald eyes toward Eren. "Look, he's blushing too!"

"Guys... stop," groaned Eren, even though he was still smiling.
"At any rate, I'm happy for you two. You seem to ground him and you compliment each other well," Erwin explained with a kindness in his eyes Eren couldn't place.

You ground him. You compliment each other well.

To hear those words made it hard for Eren not to be embarrassed, but he also found it the words nearly made his giddy.

"T-thank you, sir."

Levi had made his way back to the table, successfully composing himself and leaning over to place their respective drinks in front of them. When Eren went to reach for one his fingertips slipped on the cold, wet glass and it spilled on the front of his shirt. "Ah, crap!" He stood up and noticed it was a seeping red against his green shirt.

"You alright there, brat?" Levi asked, already reaching for a napkin to hand to Eren.

"Fine," answered Eren while he dabbed the offered napkin against his shirt. "I'm gonna run to the restroom and see if I can get this out."

Levi nodded but didn't say anything else as Eren left the table. He strode past several people sitting at the bar on the opposite end of the restaurant and pushed open the door to the men's room. The bathroom was luckily clean and nobody seemed to be inside. Eren walked over to the sinks and bunched several paper towels in his hand and ran water on them. He scrubbed furiously at the stain, sighing to himself. "Come on... come out. I actually like this shirt," he whined.

Eren didn't pay any mind to the door opening to the restroom as he continued to dab the paper towels on the stain, unsuccessfully making it disappear. Eren threw the soiled towels into the bin next to the sinks and went to wash his hands. As he did, he glanced up at the mirror in front of him and made a noise of surprise, turning abruptly and completely forgetting about his current task.

Nile was standing by the exit of the restroom while wearing what he assumed was a charming smile, it reminded Eren of a venomous snake waiting to strike. He was wearing a different suit tonight, nothing casual about his appearance at all. Eren knew it was an act, he could see right through him.

"What a coincidence that we run into each other twice on the same weekend, I'd like to believe that's
luck on my end," Nile began, his smile not wavering.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Eren hissed, wiping his hands on his trousers. He didn't bother trying to hide his disgust, it wouldn't matter anyway. Nile was slowly approaching him and it made Eren subconsciously take a step back against the counter.

Nile chuckled darkly, "I'm here with some colleagues, believe it not. You can relax, I'm not stalking you."

Eren's jaw clenched and he stood his ground firmly. "I find that hard to believe. So what are you, just an abusive rapist then?"

"You think so little of me, Eren. I think you and I got off on the wrong foot," as he said this, he continued to advance on Eren and the brunette didn't have room to back away further. His eyes blazed with bitterness.

"No, I think I know just enough about you, considering our last meeting. Now," Eren pushed himself from the sink, refusing to get cornered. He regarded Nile briefly before making his way to the exit. "I don't have time for this, so if you'll excuse me..."

Nile moved quicker than Eren ever anticipated he could, standing in front of the door and blocking him from leaving. An unsettling feeling washed over him and he tried to hide his panic. This wasn't good, this was the last thing he needed right now. He wouldn't let his dismay show, so he lifted his head and stared at Nile. "Excuse you," he said through tight lips.

"I have to say... Levi Ackerman, I didn't see that coming. Your taste in men leaves much to be desired and is extremely misguided."

Eren couldn't stop his lips from curling into a scowl as he said, "You don't know a fucking thing about me or him, for that matter."

Nile's smile made a terrible shiver run up his spine, it was positively wicked. "How much is he paying you? I can only assume that bastard would have to pay his way to have someone like--"

Eren didn't let him finish his sentence as he braced his arms against the other man and shoved him. Nile stumbled to his feet for a moment before gathering his footing, looking at Eren with amusement.
He was staring down at Eren's feet and it caused the escort to look down. The check from Levi had slipped from his pocket and onto the ground. He hastily bent down to retrieve it and shove it back into his pocket. "So I am right, he is hiring you."

Eren steadied his glare. "Get over yourself! Don't think I don't know about you, all the shit you put him through!"

Mind swimming, Eren felt his back suddenly hit a hard surface. It happened too fast for him to react, Nile pressing him against the corner of one of the stalls. Eren could feel his breath against his cheek and he felt instantly repulsed. He tried to push the other man off of him again but he wouldn't budge. Nile had more strength than Eren realized and he was trapt. "I could pay you more, you know. I think you and I... could have quite a bit of fun," he reached up and brushed his fingertips to Eren lips. Eren opened his mouth to bite the son of a bitch but his jaw was suddenly being gripped painfully. He bared his teeth to Nile.

"No, no, we're not having any of that."

"Get off of me, you petty bastard!" Eren snarled.

The hand clenching his jaw moved to his hair, gripping harshly and causing Eren to whimper. Eren tried to bring his foot up to kick the man in the crotch but Nile was surprisingly hard to attack. He pressed his knees against Eren's, making it difficult to raise his legs. *Fuck*! Eren's mind screamed when Nile leaned in and sealed his mouth over his own. It was foul, he couldn't *stand* it. He bit down on Nile's lip; *hard*. He wanted to make sure he drew blood. That move only made Nile tighten his grip on his hair and Eren was sure he was ripping strands out now.

Eren struggled, he really did. He thrashed against the taller man and tried to wrench his head away. Nile pulled back a bit and whispered in Eren's ear, "I can approve those grants you've been applying for. I know each and every bank you sent your applications to. I can do that for you, *Eren*." 

Eren suddenly ceased his fight, stunned into immobility. He couldn't believe what Nile was whispering in his ear. The other man must have taken that as a sign of victory and continued to viciously attack Eren's mouth with his own. When Nile moved to brush his hand over his clothed arousal, Eren heard a soft noise of disturbance sound inside the room.

Nile pulled back, leaving Eren dazed and leaning against the corner of the stall for support. When his unsteady gaze moved to the source of the noise, Eren felt his heart stop.
Levi was standing by the exit, his face impassive as he stared at Eren and Nile. Eren's heart began beating out his chest and he felt like it was going to lunge into his throat. He couldn't move, didn't move. He tried to see what array of emotion was behind Levi's eyes but he found there was nothing and it scared him all the more.

Nile cleared his throat, adjusting his tie while smiling at Levi. "Excuse me, and Eren," he cocked his head over his shoulder while saying, "It was nice seeing you again."

Levi didn't react when Nile brushed past him and out the door, instead, his eyes were on Eren. On the swollen lips and the unkempt hair. On the flush that adorned his cheeks and the scrunching of his shirt. They stood there in silence, only the sound of Eren's heavy breathing filling the room.

"Levi..." Eren cracked, finally commanding his feet to fucking move.

Levi was looking at him but not seeing him. When Eren called for him again, that panic manifested inside of him when Levi turned and pushed the door open and walked out without a word. Eren panicked visibly, pushing himself off of the stall and running behind yelling, "Levi!"

As soon as Eren stepped out he heard Levi call out, "Hey, Nile!"

Eren stood; stupified as Nile turned and met Levi's closed fist. Nile flew backward, landing on a table that was occupied. The guests scampered away, shrieking and screaming as Nile crashed against the tabletop. Nile wasn't given a second to react, Levi crossing over to him and bringing his fist back, successfully planting it solely against Nile's face. Levi didn't relent; bringing his fist down over and over again. Eren couldn't move, so stunned he watched helplessly.

Across the room, Erwin was the first to see what was happening. He abruptly stood up while saying, "Oh, no."

"Oh, dear," Hange said while following suit. Soon, everyone from their table rushed to oppress the situation.

Blood was pouring down Nile's face and Eren knew if Levi continued his assault, he was going to knock him unconscious. Nile was barely fighting back, unable to defend himself. Levi's teeth were bared, his face contorted with rage that Eren had never seen before. It paralyzed him. But he knew if he didn't step in, Levi wouldn't stop. His mind suddenly sharpened and he snapped out of his daze.
"Levi, stop it!"

Eren's word had no effect and he felt helpless. He finally ran over to where Levi was kneeling above Nile and grabbed his shoulder. "Levi, stop! Please!"

There was a sudden blooming of pain on Eren's cheek and he felt himself falling backward. Levi had swung his arm back, knocking Eren off and onto the floor behind them. Eren was gazing at the ceiling for a moment before he sat up, bracing himself on his elbows. Mike had moved and finally pulled Levi away from Nile, forcefully pushing him back while he bent down to assess the damage. A few of what Eren assumed were Nile's associates were rushing to his aid.

Levi slowly turned and looked at him, his eyes wild when he noticed the red mark on Eren's cheek. The escort brought his hand up to rub at it gingerly. Several guests from all over the restaurant were gathering around them, hushed whispers and loud protests sounding. It was when Eren noticed several people holding their phones to record what had just unfolded that Eren brought himself to a stand and retreated out of the building.

Levi followed him.

Eren was trying to disappear out of sight but Levi caught up with him. "Where are you going, Eren?"

The brunette turned on his feet, giving Levi an incredulous look. "What the hell was that, Levi?"

"Me? Are you asking me that? How about you tell me what the fuck that was in the bathroom!"

They were standing outside in plain view of the restaurant and Eren knew everyone inside could more than likely hear them. The streetlights lined along the sidewalk illuminated Levi's face and Eren felt his heart twist at the expression lined on his face.

"It... it isn't what you think," Eren started weakly.

Levi laughed a bitter sound that made Eren's insides cringe. "Oh, that's rich. So Nile just fell into you and started mouth fucking the ever living shit out of you?"
"No! This is just a huge misunderstanding--"

"I find that very hard to believe, given what you do for a living."

Eren tried to hide how painful those words were.

"Levi, how could you even say that?"

"Then explain it to me," Levi growled out, his eyes narrowed in vexation.

This wasn't happening, this couldn't be happening. Eren had never seen Levi look at him the way he was now. Bitterness, anger, and so much mistrust. Eren felt tears threatening to spill from his eyes but he forced them back.

"Nile... was a client of mine once," Eren started, looking down at the ground. "Around the same time you and I... you know."

Levi seemed thoughtful as if he was suddenly realizing something. Eren dreaded his next words.

"So last night you pretended you didn't know him?"

This was bad. Very bad. Eren's reasonings were all over the place.

"Did you sleep with him?"

"What? No! Of course not! How could you think I'd sleep with a bastard like him?"

"You slept with a bastard like me, didn't you?"

Eren was stilled into muteness before he rushed out, "You're not a bastard! I mentioned a few months back a client... getting a bit rough with me--"
Levi was quick with his response of, "So, that was Nile, then?"

Eren nodded, swallowing thickly. "It was..."

"So why the hell wouldn't you just tell me that, Eren?"

Eren was wringing his hands together, afraid to meet Levi's eyes. "I... when you brought up what had happened with Petra, I didn't want to stir up any old feelings. I didn't want to hurt you."

Exasperated, Levi replied, "What the fuck do I look like, I'm twelve years old?"

"Please... Levi, I wanted to tell you I just didn't know how! I didn't want to ruin... any of this," Eren brought his hand between him and Levi, indicating the two of them.

"This? Whatever the fuck this is? There isn't a label for what this is."

Eren finally looked up, hurt evident on his face. He had never heard Levi sound so cold before. "Levi..."

Levi was suddenly laughing, his shoulders were shaking and his face was lifted toward the night sky. "This... was a terrible idea. What the hell was I thinking?"

"What?" Eren breathed.

"This," Levi mimicked Eren's gesture, bringing a hand between the two of them. "This should have stopped a long time ago."

"You don't mean that," Eren whispered. "I know you don't."

"I do. I should have just left that business card on the table at that cafe. I should have walked away..." That pained laugh bubbled from Levi again and it made Eren's insides wrench. "I should
have seen the signs. I can't keep--" Levi stopped himself from finishing his sentence, instead he said, "We should stop this."

The air was cold around them, gripping Eren and holding him in its clutches. He suddenly felt unbridled rage.

"How long are we going to dance around each other and pretend, Eren? Isn't that what we've been doing?" Levi's words felt void of everything; distant and frigid.

"You're right," Eren said quietly after what seemed like an eternity, nodding to himself. His lips trembled, his body was shaking. His ocean eyes rose and met Levi's. "This was a terrible, stupid idea!"

Eren couldn't control the tremors running through him, devastation consuming him. "Agreeing to sleep with you was a stupid idea. Agreeing to spend as much time as I possibly could with you was a terrible idea. And falling in love with you was such a terrible, stupid idea!"

Eren felt hot tears trailing down his cheeks as he screeched his confession and Levi's expression was bewildered; astonished. Eren didn't waste a moment and closed the distance between them.

"I'll make this easy for you then," he started while reaching into his pocket. He pulled out the check Levi had signed for him and held it up in front of them. He ripped it down the middle, letting it flutter down and land on the concrete beneath them. "I stopped cashing your checks weeks ago. This arrangement is over."

Levi stared down at the shredded paper, his eyes glazed over with an overwhelming sense of guilt and confusion. When he looked toward Eren, he was already walking away from him and across the street. Levi didn't care at that moment about the eyes watching them or the shrill wind that chilled him. "Eren..." his voice was distant, drifting.

When Levi gained some of his composure back, he screamed out, "Where are you going? You don't know where the hell you are!"

Out of all the ridiculous things he could have said, that was all he could come up with. Eren hadn't looked back and disappeared behind the cars that passed on the busy street.

When Levi arrived back at the hotel, he was met with a pitch black room. Flicking the lights on, he
wasn't surprised to see Eren's belongings were gone. He was breathing heavily through his nose and running his hands through his hair, tugging harshly against the locks. He had never felt like this before, his chest was heavy and his mind was racing. He tried to pull back, reel himself back in but when a piercing scream was heard, Levi realized it had been his voice making the noise.

He heard his phone ringing and Levi grit his teeth, taking the device and hurling it across the room. It connected with the wall and the screen went dark.

Levi stood in the center of the suite, his panting echoing and surrounding him. His fists were clenched and his shut his eyes. What the fuck is wrong with me?

It was a loaded question, he knew. When he woke up that morning, he never expected the night to come to a close this way. Nile. Fucking Nile. If Eren hadn't stopped him he would have taken great satisfaction at dismembering the man's face. How dare he. How fucking dare he touch Eren like that? Eren was his. When he walked into that restroom, he heard the words Nile had been whispering in his ear. Promises of more money and approved medical grants. It made him sick.

'And falling in love with you was such a terrible, stupid idea!'

Levi stalked over to the kitchen area, reaching for a glass with unsteady hands and searching the cabinet in hopes of finding some sort of alcohol. When a few small bottles of complimentary liquor caught his eye, his didn't hesitate to uncap the bottle and pour its contents into the glass. He threw his head back and drank every drop, slamming the empty glass against the counter with a hiss.

How could he automatically assume Eren would do this to hurt him? Levi had advanced through all of this with Eren, knowing the knowledge of his profession. It took everything for him not to think about another person touching Eren, kissing him, making love to him the way Levi had just last night. It took every ounce of his fucking self-control to watch Eren get up every morning before he'd rise and leave without a word. But this morning it felt so natural to wake up with Eren in his arms, to see those brightly gorgeous eyes looking up at him sleepily. To see that delighted smile that Eren only seemed to wear when he was around him.

Why did I say those things to him?

There was a loud knocking on the door and Levi blatantly ignored it, refilling his drink and drinking it's liquid again.
"Fuck off!" Levi called out.

The knocking hadn't ceased and Levi could hear Erwin's voice yelling, "Levi, open the door or I swear to God I'll break it down!"

Levi couldn't remember the last time he heard Erwin so furious and he knew the man could easily make good on his word. He reluctantly opened the door, revealing a very pissed off Erwin Smith.

"What do you want, eyebrows?" Levi's voice was hoarse from screaming or perhaps the alcohol was working its wonder on him.

"I take it Eren left?"

Levi scoffed at the obvious statement, "So it seems."

"I..." Erwin opened his mouth several times, finding it hard to voice what he felt. "I don't even know where to start."

"Tch, I'm not in the mood for this shit, so if you'll kindly f--"

Erwin shot him a glare. "Sit down," he said.

Levi stared at him but complied, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Do you have any idea what you did tonight? You assaulted a man and nearly put him in the hospital! You're lucky you didn't end up in jail!"

"Can't say he didn't fucking deserve it," Levi muttered, bringing his drink to his lips. Before he could sip it, Erwin reached and snatched the glass away. "Oi, what the fuck?"

"You don't need this right now," Erwin said while moving and dumping the contents down the sink. Levi's eyebrows etched together, scowling. "Are you even hearing me right now? Did you happen to miss the fact not only did you do this on one of the most important weekends for this company but"
you did it front of people who were recording you? Do you understand where I'm going with this, Levi?"

"So what? I don't give a shit what the media says about me," said Levi.

"But you should!" Erwin's voice was desperate. "This isn't just about you, this is also about that young man you dragged into it!"

Levi hadn't thought of that and his stomach sank, realizing that it could potentially not only make Eren lose his job, but also have others find out about what he did. Levi tried to school his features but Erwin could see the panic there.

"You see? You usually have a clear head, Levi. What the hell has gotten into you? There will be more whiplash from this, I can assure you and I can't keep cleaning up your messes."

"I didn't fucking ask you to," Levi growled.

Erwin threw his hands up in defeat. "I can't talk to you when you're like this," he started. He cocked his head toward the door that was still open and said, "You can try, though I doubt it'll get you anywhere if he's like this."

Levi followed Erwin's gaze and his eyes instantly narrowed upon seeing Hange there. "You..." he breathed, pushing himself off the bed and making his way toward them. "This is all your fucking fault!"

Erwin had shoved Levi back toward the bed, his eyes daring him to continue with his actions. "Your impulsive behavior is not needed right now, Levi. Talk to someone, God only knows you need to."

Hange stood where they were while Erwin moved to leave. He glanced over his shoulder and said, "I expect you in my office 9 AM sharp tomorrow, Levi. I already arranged for your flight back tonight."

Levi watched Erwin exit without uttering another word, leaving only Hange and Levi in the room. They crossed the threshold and shut the door, walking over to the bed and sitting next to Levi. Levi's jaw was clenched, his hands tightened into fists. "I suppose you've made quite a mess, huh?"
"If you came here to fucking insult me then do me a favor and leave," Levi hissed through his teeth.

Hange giggled, despite everything, and shook their head. "That's not why I'm here. I'm here to show you this," they replied while placing a phone into Levi's lap. When Levi examined it, his eyes widened.

"This is the picture... from tonight?"

"The very one, but honey, I really want you to look at it."

He did. The first thing about the picture was the way Eren was gazing at him with the most adoring face, his smile the brightest he had ever seen. And his eyes, for fuck's sake, his eyes were practically shining. When Levi looked at himself, he saw the faintest traces of a smile but his eyes were returning the same obvious sentiments. This is what love looked like and that thought hit Levi like a freight train.

Levi's mouth was dry, he didn't know what to say. He glanced up toward Hange with a diversity of emotion behind silver orbs.

"Eren is looking at you with so much affection, Levi. Hell, the whole room could feel it. How could you possibly think he'd ever betray you like that?"

"I... I don't know what the fuck I'm doing," Levi confessed. "All of this shit happened so fast, I didn't..."

"...give him a chance to explain?" Hange supplied knowingly.

Eren said he had stopped cashing his checks weeks ago, which meant the young escort had been battling these feelings for nearly as long as he had. Hange reached back for their phone and took one of Levi's hands.

"I fucked up," Levi realized aloud. "I didn't realize that I--"
"Love him?"

Levi was silent.

"I've watched you for a long time," Hange began. "You went through the motions of life like a machine. Even before Petra passed away you were always so guarded and distant. I know it's not my place to say, but I never saw you look at Petra the way you did with Eren. It was... different. You were protective of her, but you never touched her or displayed affection towards her. But when it came to Eren, you did. Your feelings for him grew and became stronger to the point you just couldn't help yourself. You started to look like you were alive for the first time."

The raven-haired man absorbed their words, letting it seep in and sit there. He didn't have to say out loud that Hange was more spot on than probably anybody else he knew.

"You love him," Hange clarified at last. "And it's obvious he loves you too."

"So what do I do?" Levi let out breathless laughter, looking at Hange incredulously. "After all the things I said to him tonight, I may as well have called him a lying whore."

"You can still fix this."

"How? How do I fix this?"

"I can't tell you that," Hange stated sadly. "But you're a resourceful man and I know you can do it. You need to keep in mind what's important to Eren and what makes him happy."

Levi nodded mutely as Hange patted his hand and stood up. "You have a flight to catch and I need to get ready myself, but don't hesitate to find me if you need me."

While they were turning to leave, Levi called out, "Shitty glasses."

Hange turned their head briefly. "Yes?"
"Thank you."

Hange looked surprised but beamed at his words. "Someone needs to keep you in line and you know that someone is moi!"

Levi didn't bother hiding the rolling of his eyes.

"And for what it's worth, I don't regret calling that night."

The statement resonated deep inside Levi, chuckling dryly to himself as he stood up from the bed. When Hange was gone, Levi was left in silence. He glanced around the room in preparation for packing when something that wasn't on one of the nightstands earlier had captured his interest. Dark brows furrowing in question, Levi cautiously walked over to see something made of stone sitting on the night table with a small note underneath. He picked up the piece gently, studying it carefully. He had seen this before... he just couldn't wrack his brain as to where. It was sculpted beautifully, though Levi was sure it was an imitation of an original. There were two people huddled close with their arms around each other, it was entrancing.

Picking up the piece of paper on the surface, he read the words aloud. "The Kiss represents two people merging into one, but it is inaccurate to echo the artist in calling his sculptures simple: nothing could be more complicated than the dramatic contrasts between the two..."

Levi felt an overwhelming stinging behind his eyes and he let out an unsteady breath, gripping both objects toward his chest. This... spoke more volumes than anything Eren had ever done before. His heart never felt such a profound feeling of loss before. It felt... empty.

*I don't regret any of it, either. Not one fucking bit. Shit... what the hell have I done?*

"I'll make this right," he murmured to himself. "I'll fix this. I just hope you'll let me, Eren."

"Is there anything I can get you, sir?"

Eren's eyes rose wearily and he was sure the flight attendant could see how red and puffy they were. "Do you have anything that'll knock me unconscious?"
The attendant was taken off guard, smiling hesitantly. "Um... I-I don't think so, sir."

Eren sighed and turned back toward the window. "No thanks, I'm fine. Forget I said that."

He was left alone after that, staring impassively out toward the sky beneath. He had gone back to the room after him and Levi's falling out packed his things as quickly as he could and jumped a cab to the airport. He was fortunate to have had his emergency debit card with him to book the first available flight back to New York. There was no point in staying there any longer seeing as though Levi decided that things should end between them.

If he thought he was anxious when he flew with Levi, he couldn't even imagine what a mess he must have looked like now. The flight would be relatively short but it didn't help put Eren at ease. He attempted to sketch, listen to music, nothing seemed to help settle him. Deciding to just close his eyes and try to sleep, he kept remembering the words exchanged between him and Levi only a few hours prior. It made him restless and it frustrated him.

Eren felt like his entire world was crashing around him and he didn't know how to stop it.

Chapter End Notes

So... don't be mad. A lot of you guessed there would be a falling out, I'm just sure it wasn't what you imagined. I assure you, this was the most angsty part of the story and it'll get better from here. These two will get their happy ending if it's the last thing I do.

I've pretty much written all of the chapters for this story so I will be uploading them each Friday until the story is complete. As always, thank you for your comments, your kudos, and feedback. Let me know what you liked, disliked, want to see change, etc. I enjoy hearing from you. This story wouldn't be what it is without you.

By the way, has anyone gone out and purchased the new SNK video game yet? Have you seen the footage of it? If you haven't then you need to Youtube that shit because it's epic. Like I can't deal with how amazing the game itself looks. As soon as I'm able, I'm getting it for my PS4.

And seeing as though many of you were all for the Last of Us AU, I have already begun working on it. So I'll post it soon.

Thanks as always and see you next chapter.
Eren couldn't have been more happy to be home.

He unlocked the front door and slipped inside, dropping his bags next to it. He was met with nothing but silence and he couldn't have been more grateful. Mikasa must have been working a graveyard shift tonight. All he wanted to do was shower and crawl into bed for the rest of the night. Eren glanced at the clock and it read 12:03 AM. It was late and with everything that had happened just that night, Eren was exhausted beyond all reasoning. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and noticed Levi hadn't tried contacting him.

He frowned deeply and skimmed to Levi's name in his contacts, silently deliberating on calling him or not. He wondered what had happened to him after he left. Did he stay at the restaurant? Go back to the hotel? Hell, for all Eren knew Levi could have been arrested. His finger hovered above the name for a short moment before he sighed and turned his phone away. He needed time to think and he was sure Levi did as well, though he seemed to have made up his mind relatively fast.

Showering, right. Eren walked through the kitchen and the only light that was on was above the stove. As he strode past, he hadn't noticed a figure leaning against the counter. The shadow caught Eren's eye and he staggered back, nearly tripping over his own feet.

"Holy shit! What the hell, Mikasa? Why are you standing in the damn dark?" Eren exclaimed with a hand over his pounding heart.

Mikasa tilted her head but her face remained the same. "Sorry, I wasn't trying to scare you."
"You sure about that? Any normal person would have a freaking light on. You almost gave me a heart attack!"

Saying those words, Eren flicked the kitchen light on. He squinted his eyes momentarily while his vision adjusted but Mikasa barely blinked.

"I think you and I need to talk," Mikasa said in a cryptic voice.

Eren groaned, running a tired hand over his face. "Can this wait until morning? I'm really tired and I just want to get in the shower and--"

"No, we need to talk now."

Unsure of Mikasa's tone, Eren just stood there staring at her. She wasn't giving much away with her expression and Eren began wondering if something was wrong. It sure as hell sounded like it. "Is... something the matter? Is it Mom?"

"No, nothing like that. Although I can't say something isn't wrong."

Eren thought about sitting but he couldn't bring himself to move. He felt uneasy. "Then what's the matter? Why're you standing in the dark like a creep waiting for me to come home?"

"Because I know you weren't at Annie's this weekend."

Eren's heart slammed against his chest in panic but he remained calm. "Yes, I was. I left you a note and everything. I don't know where you get off trying to be a second mother to me but I really don't need it right now."

Mikasa's shoulders stiffened as if she wanted to say more, but she was quiet. Instead, she reached behind her and placed something against the counter. When Eren caught sight of what it was, his eyes widened fractionally. It was his business card. His.

"Where... did you get that?" he finally asked.
"Your dresser," she replied slowly. "And I called the main number and they knew you as soon as I said your name."

Eren's eyes rose and he glared at his sister. "What the fuck, who do you think you are just going through my things!"

"I did it because I've been worried sick about you!" she finally exclaimed, her face contorted with distress. "You're gone at odd hours of the night, you leave home in one outfit and come back in another, you've been skipping some of your classes and you disappear for days at a time! How could I not be worried!"

Eren's lips were pressed into a thin line, his eyes swirling with anger. "What I do in my spare time is none of your business, sis."

"That's your response? Seriously Eren, you're selling yourself for money! Do you even understand how dangerous that is?!"

"I can take care of myself," Eren snarled, turning his back to Mikasa and leaving the room. He wanted to laugh just to stop himself from crying. How could this possibly get any worse?

"Really, Eren?" she called out behind him. Dammit, she was fucking following him. "Because I guarantee if you spent one minute on your phone you'd think differently."

"What the hell are you talking about? You're not making sense."

"Look at this!" she pleaded, holding the screen of her phone to his face. Eren tried averting his eyes but Mikasa was insisting thrusting the device at him. "Watch this, Eren!"

Eren did and it took his mind several seconds to comprehend what he was seeing. It was Levi, raising his fist down repeatedly against Nile's face. The angle of it was different from what Eren remembered and he could see himself in the background, too stunned to move. The camera was shaky and it would sometimes direct to the floor, but Eren could see exactly what was happening. How could he not when he was there. Shortly after, Eren watched himself run to Levi, placing a hand on his shoulder to make him stop. Eren was pushed back and the two of them were followed outside. Each holler and scream was clear as day, each word that was spewed between them revealed. Eren felt tears collecting in his eyes, unable to believe that in a mere few hours, this had
reached social media. *Levi Ackerman, Executive Chief of Smith Advertising, a widower, spotted in New Hampshire for annual Advertisers Convention, with word of hiring a young escort?*

Eren couldn't watch anymore but couldn't tear his eyes away. He suddenly shoved Mikasa's phone away from him. "Stop, I don't want to see anymore."

"What possessed you to do this? What if he had attacked you?"

"He wouldn't have done that and I'm not about to sit here and convince you," Eren voice was cracking as he went into his room and grabbed his backpack by his bed, throwing several articles of clothing in it.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?" Mikasa demanded.

Eren looked at his sister and said, "I can't do this right now. I just can't. Leave me alone, Mikasa. Just stop!"

Eren tossed his backpack over his shoulder and strode past his sister, not looking back toward her as she cried out, "Eren! Please, just talk to me!"

He ignored her even if his insides twisted at the desperation in her voice. This was too much, all of this was too much for him to handle. His mom, Levi, now his sister. Nile, his job, everything. Eren felt like he was on the verge of having a panic attack when he finally made it back outside into the cold night.

And he was running.

His legs were carrying him as his shoes pounded against the concrete, tears freely flowing from his eyes from the speed and the emotions piercing through his heart. He didn't know what possessed him to run; maybe he felt it was the only option he had at this point. He also didn't know how long he had been running for but his lungs were screaming for relief. He came to a slow jog and looked behind him, making sure Mikasa hadn't followed him. It was too dark to see with the exception of a few streetlights. The only thing he could hear was the sound of his own breathing.

Leaning and placing his hands against his knees, Eren moved one hand toward his pocket and pulled out his phone. He browsed through his contacts and selected the only person who might help keep
him sane at that moment. He felt sweat dripping down his brow despite the chill in the air and dried tears on his cheek.

"Hello?" Armin's voice was muffled, more than likely asleep already.

"Armin," Eren panted, his voice strained as he tried to hold back the quiver in tone.

"Eren? What... what time is it?"

"I'm sorry... I know it's late," Eren responded unsteadily.

"What's wrong? Are you... Eren, are you crying?"

"Look, I'm about to lose my mind and I don't know where to go. I can't go home. Please, please, I don't know what to do right now."

"Where are you right now?" Armin's voice was getting shaper with concern.

"A few blocks from my house," Eren's green eyes traveled up to the street sign next to him. "Maplewood."

"Stay where you are and I'll come get you," Armin said and Eren could hear the jingling of keys in the background.

Nodding, Eren uttered a soft goodbye and shoved his phone back into his pocket. He took a few steps toward the edge of the sidewalk and plopped down to sit. He buried his face against his knees and wrapped his arms underneath, closing his eyes and waiting in silence for Armin.

"Is your grandpa home?" Eren asked hesitantly as he stepped into the comfort of Armin's home. The house smelled of cinnamon and pine, reminding Eren of when he'd travel with his family Upstate for winter vacation. Armin's grandfather was a traditional man who originated from North Carolina and he enjoyed collecting country antiques and decorations. The whole house was adorned with pottery and old-fashioned figurines.
"He's away until Wednesday, so don't worry. Even if he was here you're like a second grandson to him," Armin reminded him while leading Eren inside the den. Armin left Eren's side for a few minutes before emerging with a water bottle. "Drink this, you look like you're about to fall over."

Eren accepted and drank nearly half the bottle, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Thanks," he said.

They both sat on the couch and Armin leaned his elbows against his knees, waiting patiently for Eren to speak. Armin was too good to him sometimes, Eren didn't know what he'd done to deserve such loyal people in his life.

"I'm sorry for waking you... I didn't even think if you had classes or anything tomorrow," Eren admitted shamefully.

"Don't worry about it, I can afford to miss a few classes. Talk to me, Eren. What's going on?"

Eren took another sip of his water and contemplated the question. "I don't even know where to fucking start," he sighed shakily.

"Try from the beginning," Armin encouraged.

Eren took in a shuttering breath and decided to just say the worst of it. "I'm an escort."

Armin's ocean eyes widened at the confession. "An... escort, as in--"

"Offering my time or myself for money," Eren clarified, though he knew Armin already knew that.

Eren spared a nervous glance at Armin, who looked perplexed in what to say next.

"Alright," Armin said slowly. "Give me a second to... process this."

Eren was tapping his fingers against his knees, watching as Armin sifted through his thoughts.
"Okay," Armin nodded finally. "So you're essentially the same as Annie then."

"Wait, what?" Eren asked. "You know about Annie?"

Armin laughed lightly and Eren couldn't find what was funny about the situation. "You know Annie and I are dating, right?"

"Since when?"

"Since three months ago."

Eren was shocked, his mouth hanging open. "How the hell didn't I know that? I just talked to her!"

"Annie's... a very private person, Eren. You should know that. And even though you're an openly social person, I always sensed you were hiding something. Everyone's entitled to their secrets, I'm no exception. But you always looked so... distressed when something was wrong. Like you wanted to say something but you just couldn't."

"Annie offered me the job when she knew how desperate I was raising money for my mom," Eren said. "I wouldn't do it at first but I trusted her and I knew she wouldn't steer me wrong."

Armin accepted what he was saying with no qualms and Eren was beyond grateful for that. "Mikasa found out tonight, right before I came here. That's why I couldn't go back to the house."

"Oh, Oh. I can't even imagine how she reacted," Armin sympathized.

"Terribly," Eren buried his face in his hands. "She confronted me as soon as I came home. She went into my room while I was away and found my business card and just... relentlessly asked questions and screamed at me. I couldn't take how disappointed she looked."

"We both know Mikasa couldn't be disappointed in you no matter what you did. She needs time to accept all of this, she does love you, you know. Even if it's a bit much at times."
"I don't know about this time, Ar. She..." Eren swallowed. "I hope you're right, I love her too. I don't know what I'd ever do without her."

"You need to let this pass and it'll take time."

Eren’s gaze averted to the floor and he nodded mutely.

"Something else is on your mind," Armin observed calmly.

Eren could see Armin looking at him expectantly, smiling softly as he did. "You can tell me. I know you've kept all of this bottled up for so long and I think that's why you're finally at your breaking point. You don't know how to handle it now that everything is out in the open."

His lip trembled and he shook his head. "I... think I lost someone I really care about tonight."

"Who?"

"Someone who hired me, you've seen him before."

Armin tried to think back to when he'd ever seen Eren with anybody else besides their usual group of friends. His sharp mind remembered one particular man speaking with Eren at a cafe they favored. Armin snapped his fingers and said, "The man from the cafe?"

Eren nodded. "Yes, his name is Levi Ackerman."

"The executive chief of Smith Advertising? That's who hired you?" the blonde astonished.

Mutely, Eren nodded again.

"So that's why you stayed behind that day..." Armin mused to himself.
"It started out casual, it really did. But I always felt something... different from him. We were open with each other and we confided in one another. We were nearly seeing each other every few days. He paid me and after so long I just couldn't bring myself to cash the checks anymore. It felt wrong like I was using him. I wanted to be with him and before I realized it..."

"You fell in love with him?" Armin supplied softly.

Eren sniffed, wiping furiously at his eyes. "I did and I still love him. Something big happened tonight and I don't know if we could ever come back from it. He said we should end things and I left. I couldn't look at him after he said that."

"What happened?" Armin inquired.

Eren didn't need to tell Armin, but he knew he could show him. Eren grabbed his phone and typed out a few simple words in his search engine before handing it over to Armin. Armin sat back and quietly watched while Eren kept his head in his hands. He could hear it all over again and the images cascaded through his mind like water. He felt his knee bouncing from just listening.

"Oh, Eren..." Armin breathed. He put the phone on the coffee table and moved to where Eren was sitting. Armin wrapped his arms around his best friend and Eren embraced him back, unable to hold back the sobs that wracked through his body.

"I don't know what to do, Armin. I feel like I lost everything in a single night. Levi, my sister, I could lose my job, if I can't raise the money for my mother then she'll--" Eren couldn't form words anymore as he cried harder. Armin patted his back and let him release all the heartache and frustration that was plaguing him. "I don't know what to do," he repeated.

Eren didn't know how time had passed but Armin was patient, letting his cry against him until the front of his shirt was soaked. It was a strange relief to feel the floodgates open the way they did. How long had he waited to not hide anymore? But this isn't how he wanted things to turn out, not by a long shot. But for that night Eren didn't want to think or try to come up with a solution. He just wanted to be in his feelings and find release through it. Armin would pat his back and tell him it's okay, that it was all going to be okay, and Eren wanted to believe him. He wasn't sure if he could at that moment though.

Armin led Eren to the guest room and he hugged the shorter man goodnight, thanking him for everything he had done for him. It was probably three in the morning by the time Eren crawled under the covers and stared blankly at the ceiling. He was exhausted, he knew but his eyes wouldn't close.
They were irritated by the amount of crying he had done earlier and he sighed, rubbing them gingerly. When was the last time he had let go like that?

Eren looked at his phone and noticed the obscene amount of times Mikasa had tried to get a hold of him, but Levi hadn't tried calling him at all. Eren didn't have the willpower to dwell on it anymore and he shut the device off. He tossed the phone on the other side of the bed and turned onto his side, dull eyes looking at the window. His mind was racing and he closed his eyes, trying to force himself to fall asleep. But that wasn't a feat so easily achieved. He laid there for hours.

When rays of morning light began breaking through the blinds in the window, Eren had finally succumbed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I lied. Here an over-emotional Eren for you. And Mikasa just being Mikasa because I love her.

But good things happen next chapter, I promise. Even some funny bits because we all know this story needs it right now.

Thank you all for your comments, kudos, and feedback. It means more to me than any of you guys might realize. Hope to see you next chapter!
Mend

Chapter Notes

Levi got angry. Eren cried. Angst fest is over. Huzzah. I figured updating on Eren's birthday was appropriate.

Follow me on Tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Levi stood outside of Erwin's office and was already dreading going inside. Hadn't slept the night before and the dark circles under his eyes were pronounced. Flying home and trying to get himself settled was an ordeal as it was. That morning he had to purchase a new phone since he'd broken his other one. Probably not a very smart move on his part but rationality was not present with him the night prior. He had attempted to call Eren several times and each call he placed he was met with voicemail. He was worried about him. Did he end up staying in Manchester or did he go home? Levi could have ripped the city apart looking for him but knew rushing after Eren was probably not a good idea. After what was said, he was sure Eren needed to be alone. Otherwise, he wouldn't have left in the first place.

Sighing at those thoughts, Levi pushed the door open and entered Erwin's office.

Erwin was sitting at his desk, sifting through an orderly stack of paper. His blue eyes rose and met Levi's from across the room. Levi could kick the son of a bitch, not a hair was misplaced on his head and clothes pristine. Levi was sure he looked like he had just gotten hit by a truck. He hadn't even worn a suit that day, he threw on the first casual outfit he could find. He couldn't deny black was a color he favored, seeing as though he was wearing a loose black long-sleeved shirt and slacks.

"Sit,' Erwin said. Levi nodded and moved to sit in one of the two chairs in front of his desk. Erwin's attention quickly shifted from his paperwork to the man sitting in front of him. "They're working on removing the video, we're hoping to have it offline within a few days."

"Thank fuck," Levi muttered in relief. It didn't help that it was still accessible but it was a good step forward.

"Nile only needed a few stitches on his forehead and cheek, other than that he's fine. He agreed to not press charges against you," Erwin explained.
"Considering he's nearly sexually assaulted Eren twice now, it'd be stupid of him to even think about going after me. He's lucky I didn't do more," Levi said.

Levi hadn't known it at the time, too caught up in something as insignificant as jealousy to think clearly. He had never felt it so strongly before in his entire life and it all but consumed him at the time. It's the whole reason him and Eren were in this mess.

Erwin looked contemplative as if he was trying to come up with what to say. "You don't have to give me details, I'm not trying to invade your privacy. What you do with your free time isn't my business. But what happened last night escalated from something else. I'd like it if you to talk to me about it," he clarified.

Levi scoffed, glaring at Erwin. "What are you, my fucking therapist now?"

Shock coursed through Levi when Erwin suddenly slammed his hand against his desk. "No, I'm not. But I thought I was your friend, Levi!"

Levi's body stiffened at the words and he struggled with a reply. "You are," he stated. He sighed deeply, bringing his fingers up to rub against his temples. "It's... really fucking complicated, Erwin."

"What I've gathered is Hange stuck their nose where it didn't belong, which doesn't surprise me, and hired an escort for you. Somewhere down the line, you run into him again and you both agree to you hiring him."

"That about covers the beginning of it, yeah," Levi assented. "I'm assuming Hange can't keep their mouth shut."

"You know they never do," said Erwin. "But that isn't what caused this. What caused this is you both developed feelings for each other but never acted on them beyond physical intimacy. You both went on like this for months and it inevitably became too hard for either of you to say anything to each other because you denied your own emotions. You were both afraid of unbalancing what you already had."

_Was this man a psychologist in another life? Holy shit._

"I think we both tried," Levi admitted in a deep voice. "But we didn't know what the hell we were
"Do you love him?" Erwin asked softly.

Levi's gaze didn't sway from Erwin's when he nodded firmly. The other man smiled.

"I can see he loves you too, Levi. And like I told Eren, you both compliment each other well."

Levi wasn't sure how well they'd compliment each other if they weren't together anymore. After the bullshit Levi spewed the night prior, he wasn't sure if Eren would ever want to see him again.

"So is it safe to assume you're not giving me the boot then?" Levi directed the conversation elsewhere, unable to talk about Eren without a lump forming in his throat.

Erwin chuckled, "Of course not. Actually, I think I've found something for you that'll offer a good distraction for you."

A dark brow arched at that. "Really? And what might that be?"

"One of my affiliates in California lost quite a bit of his staff recently, they're short-handed until they bring in the necessary fill-ins they need. Zackly and I go back quite a bit, you remember him?"

Levi nodded. Darius Zackly was the CEO of one of the most major advertising agencies on the west coast, "Yeah, I remember him. The one that's always cheating on his wife? A shame he wasn't at the gathering this year," he deadpanned.

"At any rate, he needs the best to get the ball rolling again and I suggested you," Erwin concluded, regarding Levi with a cautious gaze.

"Out of everybody here why the hell would you insist on me?"

"You're my best, you've got a firm grasp on what it takes to get a good group of people together and run a business. If I wasn't needed here, I'd go myself. And with everything that's happened in the
past few days I think it would do you good to--"

"To what? Fucking disappear?" Levi snapped.

"Levi, please don't fight me on this. If you're really adamant about not going, I could try to see if Mike will. I just know you're more suitable for the job," Erwin said honestly.

Levi tapped his fingers on the chair while he contemplated this and he sighed. "Fine, when would you need me to go and how long would I be gone?"

"Preferably this week and as far as how long, it could be two to three weeks."

"For fuck's sake, Erwin," Levi groused.

"If I'll pass quickly if you're busy, I assure you. And you'll still have time before you leave to get things situated here," Erwin said meaningfully.

Levi caught on but didn't say anything about it, nodding his head and standing from his seat. "Is that everything?"

"It is," Erwin replied. He leaned forward and placed his hands together on his desk. He looked at Levi with a sympathetic gaze. "I know things will work out, Levi. I can see how much this is hurting you even if you're not admitting to that hurt. But I truly believe you'll figure out a way to resolve it and if you need anything, even just to talk, I'm here."

Levi knew Erwin understood his personality probably better than anybody, with the exception of Eren. He had helped him when he knew he was at his lowest in life. Hell, he was the reason he was as successful as he was today. He knew the other man meant well and he had an old-fashioned way of handling things, but despite that, he was still a close friend.

"Right," he said. "I'll give you an exact day when I have a better idea of what's going on."

With that, Levi turned to leave and didn't look back. He had a time limit now and if he was going to try to rectify things with Eren, he needed to do it quickly.
It was 2:16 PM when Eren opened his eyes and he groaned miserably at how late it was. He turned over and his body ached from sleeping in an awkward position, his bones cracking as he moved. Even with how long he had slept, he still felt tired. The room was still dark thankfully from the deep brown curtains that covered the window but he could still see a bit of the sun trying to make its way through. He sat up and braced his hands behind him and ran his hand through his messy hair. He was mentally strained and still jet-lagged from the night before. He couldn't believe how much had happened within just a few hours, it made his head spin.

His eyes traveled toward his phone and his hand went to pick it up but stopped abruptly, his hand hovering in the air then dropping it.

_I should get up. I can't just lay here all day._

He forced himself out of the bed and his feet padded across the cold floor, opening the door slowly to peak his head out. There didn't seem to be anybody home though Armin was usually very quiet. He stepped out fully and searched the living room, the dining room, he knocked on Armin's bedroom door and received no response, then he walked over to the kitchen and noticed a note on the counter. He picked it up while he leaned against the surface.

_Had to work, but I'll be home by 9. Didn't want to disturb you. Help yourself to anything you want and just relax. -Armin_

Poor Armin, he was up till nearly 4 AM with him last night and Eren felt guilty for it. He felt bad for throwing all of this on his friend the way he had but he was grateful he had come here. It gave him a chance to finally catch his breath and collect his scattered thoughts. He took Armin up on his offer and helped himself to some juice in the fridge, knowing water alone wouldn't quench his dry throat. He poured himself a glass, knowing where Armin and his grandfather normally kept all kitchenware. He leaned his back against the counter and just sipped quietly, unsure of what he could do. He wasn't hungry, even though he hadn't eaten since the night before. His body couldn't seem to stomach the idea of eating any food so he resigned himself to go shower instead.

Eren's aching muscles stretched under the hot stream of water and he let out an appreciative breath, rolling his shoulders and losing himself in his thoughts. No matter what he did, his mind would always go back to Levi. He dreamt about him, his voice, his eyes, his smile and his touch. He tried to think of others things, like the fact that Mikasa was probably losing her mind wondering where he was. Or that he hadn't spoken to his mother all weekend and he should check in. But he just couldn't and his mind kept bringing up the mental image of Levi.

It felt dangerous to keep this way of thinking up so Eren finished his shower quickly, stepping out and toweling off relatively fast. He retrieved his backpack and shuffled through it, pulling out a pair
of sweatpants and a t-shirt. He didn't really care what he looked like, it wasn't as if he had any plans. It was too soon to go back and speak to Mikasa and even if he wanted to, he lacked the energy. He was thankful he kept a spare toothbrush in his backpack otherwise he would have had to go out and purchase one. Trying to get your teeth clean without one was just a no go. He used his hand to comb it through his hair and he took the time to finally take in his appearance.

It was evident he had been crying even if it was hours ago, the area beneath his eyes red. He noticed his face had a paler hue to it, indicating his exhaustion. Whatever, Eren thought as he finished getting himself together. When he stepped back out into the living room, he began realizing the silence was starting to bother him. It was almost deafening. He debated turning his phone on and checking to see who had tried calling him but decided against it. He couldn't imagine the messages he probably received just from Mikasa alone, but seeing how much his friends used social media, he was sure they had at least heard of the video uploaded with him in it. Eren hadn't taken the time to see if his name appeared at all in the feed but just the thought of doing that made him sick. He didn't want to see that scene unfold again.

Unsure of what to do, Eren decided to just go back to the bed. Armin wouldn't be home for a couple of hours anyway and just sitting by himself was too much for him. He walked back into the guest room and dropped unceremoniously on the bed, not caring how unorderly the sheets were from it. He brought his arm to drape over his eyes and he closed them.

He didn't want to think anymore, just sleep.

He drove until he realized he was in front of Eren's house, hands still gripping the steering wheel and gazing toward the home. He couldn't bring himself to get out of the car. His grip tightened and his knuckles were white as he sat there, unsure if it was a good idea or not to seek Eren out just yet. Something had brought him here though and he couldn't deny the need to speak to Eren was all but plaguing him.

He sighed and turned off the engine, slipping his keys into the pocket of his long coat as he stepped out. His gray eyes traveled and examined the flowers neatly tucked beneath the porch and the chairs that were on either side of it. There was one car in the driveway and that made Levi hesitate a bit. He walked across the yard and up to the front door, raising his fist to knock against the wood. His hand halted in mid-air for a few moments but he gathered his resolve and knocked loudly. He listened carefully for any sign of anybody inside but heard none. There were no footsteps, no shadows through the windows. Levi frowned and tried again. Nothing, nada, zip.

Levi walked away from the door and pulled out his new phone, annoyed at trying to figure out where he fucking contacts were again. He found Eren's name and tapped it, bringing it to his ear and waiting. Once again, all he received on the other end was, "Hi, this is Eren! Please leave a message, or don't, really it's your choice."
"Dammit," Levi muttered, ending the call. He looked around the property and noticed the fence which Levi assumed led to the backyard was open. When he picked Eren up a few days prior, he was sure it was closed. Curious and deciding to take a chance, he strode over and walked toward the back of the home. The backyard was bare, save for a few pots and a recycling bin, but the detached garage is what caught Levi’s eye. More specifically, the door was open to it.

Levi stepped in slowly, taking in his surroundings carefully. As he did, shock crossed his face.

Art supplies were strewn all over what appeared to be a handmade table in the center of the room, several sculptures both complete and not littered the tabletop. There weren't just sculptures though, there were wire workings as well are pastels and unfinished sketches. Scraping tools and sharpeners were next to most of the pieces of art and it wasn't hard to see where Eren spent most of his time. Levi trod carefully and ran a hand over the designs with awe, captivated by the amount of talent Eren truly had. He hadn't had to chance to see any of Eren's work yet and seeing them now for the first time made Levi's heart swell.

Levi was so immensely distracted that he hadn't picked up on the footsteps behind him.

"Who the hell are you?"

The raven-haired man whipped around, his hand still in the air as he met a furious gaze. It took several seconds for Levi to remember seeing this woman from the cafe that day he had run into Eren. No doubt about it, this was Eren's sister, Mikasa.

Levi held his hands up, trying to show the woman he wasn't a threat. "I'm not here to rob you, I was just looking for Eren."

"How do you know my bro--" Mikasa stopped speaking in mid-sentence, her eyes narrowing in recognition. "You," she hissed.

This isn't good, Levi realized as Mikasa leaned and reached for a bat that was pressed against the wall near her. She enclosed it within both of her hands and snarled, "You're the one from the cafe, the friend from work, the man in the video with him!"

Levi had just enough time to duck down beneath the table when Mikasa swung the bat with full force, knocking several objects from the table above across the garage. "Are you fucking insane?!" Levi shouted.
"You hired my brother for sex and you're asking me if I'm insane?!

Mikasa didn't relent, walking around the center table and advancing toward Levi with the bat held tightly. Levi moved from his spot and maneuvered his way around the table, circling it with Eren's sister. "I get it, you're pissed. But if you just give me a chance to fucking explain myse--"

Levi threw himself to the floor when Mikasa took another swing with the bat, shattering whatever was in its path. Levi cringed. "Your brother is going to be upset you're destroying all of his shit, you know."

Mikasa's eyes widened and her nostrils flared. Probably not the smartest thing to say.

"You don't know a damn thing about Eren!" she barked out.

Levi braced his hands against the tabletop, squaring off with her. "I know more than you think, sweetheart, so if we can stop with this cat and mouse bullshit, it'd be greatly appreciated."

Mikasa made a beeline for him, taking the weapon in hand and raising it above her head. Levi steadied himself, shooting his hand forward to grasp the bat before it smacked into him. "I've never put my hands on a woman before but you are really forcing my hand here. Could you put the bat down before you turn my face into a fucking dimple?"

It took Mikasa several seconds to decide whether to move or not, the weapon in her hand shaking against Levi's. She finally lowered the bat, keeping her cold eyes on Levi. "Fucking hell," the man muttered, rubbing his wrist gingerly. "No wonder he said you'd break down my door. Christ, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Mikasa gave him a critical look at the mention of Eren. "What are you doing here? You shouldn't be here."

"Like I said, I'm looking for Eren," Levi explained while meeting Mikasa's strong gaze.

"He isn't here," she responded stiffly.
Levi's brows rose at that and he felt panic swelter. "He didn't come home last night?"

"Of course he did, but he left after I tried talking some sense into him about how dangerous this situation was," she said.

"Oh, I see," Levi began. "So after all of the shit he already went through, you felt it was necessary to tack on some more? I'm sure that's exactly what he needed."

"Don't tell me what Eren needs, you bastard!"

"I don't need to tell you anything but you should have taken a step back instead of jumping on him the first chance you could. I don't blame him for leaving, hell, I would have."

"You're the whole reason this is happening to begin with!" Mikasa accused loudly.

"You're right," Levi accepted, his voice dropping several octaves. "But you didn't help with the situation at all. Instead of jumping down his throat, you should have been there for him. I might be a bastard for saying the things I said, but I plan on making right on it. I didn't intentionally hurt Eren but I won't deny that I did in the end. Do you even realize why Eren's been keeping this from you? Exactly this reason. He isn't doing this for enjoyment, he's doing it for your family. And as his family, you should be trying to reach out to him instead of belittling him."

"I didn't belittle him!" Mikasa fired back, though her shoulders fell forward in guilt. "I just... I want him safe, if something happens to Carla, he'll be all I have left. I just don't want him to get hurt. I would never judge him for any of his choices."

Levi listened and replied, "Then you need to tell him that. He'd probably appreciate hearing that more than the negative shit you spewed last night."

"I haven't been able to get a hold of him since last night, he turned his phone off. He's probably avoiding both of us," she reasoned.

"I wouldn't blame him," Levi spoke quietly. Not much was said after that and Levi wasn't sure if that was his cue to leave or not. Deciding not to piss the woman off again now that she had calmed
down, he adjusted his coat accordingly and began to walk out of the garage. "I'm sorry for barging in."

"What are your intentions with Eren?" Mikasa asked from behind him.

Levi turned on his heels, considering his words carefully. "I want him happy, just like you. Believing me or not is entirely up to you, but I do care about him. He... grew on me from the moment I saw him. And if he never wants to see me again, I'll respect that. It'll hurt like hell, but I probably don't deserve him either way."

"Do you love him?"

Mikasa didn't get a response, though she noticed a small smile that edged along Levi's mouth as he turned his back toward her. "It was nice seeing you again, Mikasa," was all he said before leaving the backyard and heading to his car. When he was seated inside the safety of his vehicle (grateful to not have been beaten to death by Eren's sister), a thought had struck him.

He had heard partially some of Nile's words to Eren the night prior and remembered that Nile said something about the loans and grants Eren had been applying for. Could it have been possible that bastard purposely denied them because of Eren resisting him or was he just aware? Either way, Levi had figured out what his next step was to helping Eren move forward from all of this.

Levi pulled out his phone and did a quick search, browsing for a number. When he had found what he was looking for, he didn't hesitate to tap on the number and lean back in his seat. His eyes roamed the neighborhood in front of him while the phone rang quietly. By the second ring, a woman answered in a monotone voice, "Wayward Bank, how may I direct your call?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you could tell me when Mr. Dok would be in next?" Levi feigned politely.

"He'll be in Wednesday around 8 AM. Would you like me to leave a message for him?"

"Oh, no thank you. Thank you for your time," Levi ended the call before the woman could respond. He put his phone away and started his car, putting it into drive and pulling away from Eren's house.

Chapter End Notes
We can all picture Mikasa taking a bat to Levi, am I right? But at any rate, Levi pretty much accepts he would deserve it. He hates himself for what he said to Eren and jumping to conclusions as quickly as he did. As you all probably see, Levi and Eren just aren't good at acting on their actual feelings. And Eren is just being a depressed Eren but for good reasons. Next chapter will address that, no worries.

As always, thanks for sticking with me. We have 3 chapters to go. This is my first Levi/Eren fic and I really enjoyed writing it. I'll post my next work after this is finished. Kudos, comments, and feedback are love. Thanks so much!
Levi entered the main Corporate Branch of Wayward Bank, pushing his way through the revolving door as he did. He walked through the lobby and his eyes roamed over the directory, using his finger to trace and pinpoint Nile's office. Finding the information he needed, he pressed the button off to the side and waited for the elevator to descend. Once the doors opened with a ding, Levi walked into it and pressed the 12th floor.

Levi crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back and waiting as the elevator beeped quietly for each floor ascended. When the elevator beeped a final time, the doors slid open and Levi briskly walked out. His shoes clicked against the granite beneath noisily as he approached what Levi assumed was an assistant of Nile's. She was a young woman, which didn't surprise him in the least, with long blond hair that was straightened. She wore a shirt that revealed too much of her cleavage and Levi wanted to scowl.

"Can I help you?" she asked, realizing he had been standing there. She looked up from her computer and offered Levi a sweet smile.

"I'm here to see Nile Dok," he said easily.

"Do you have an appointment? If not, I'm afraid he's asked to keep it appointments only today."

"That's too bad," Levi replied. The assistant gave Levi a questionable look as he ignored her, walking away and toward Nile's office.

"Sir! You can't just go in without an appointment!" she called after him.

"Fucking watch me," Levi muttered. When he reached the door that was glaring with the name 'Nile Dok', Levi didn't hesitate to push it open.
When Levi made it past the door, he saw Nile sitting at his desk across the way. He was staring at his computer screen, not aware Levi was there yet. Levi took great gratification in seeing the butterfly bandage above the man's brow and a few stitches near the side of his face. When Levi's shoes sounded against the floor, Nile looked up and his eyes widened fractionally. "How the hell did you get in here?" he demanded as he reached for the company phone sitting on his desk.

"Don't," Levi warned in a low voice, closing the door and narrowing his eyes. "Or I'll fly across this room and finish what I started."

Nile's hand halted in the air even when he assistant came on the speaker asking, "Mr. Dok? Do you want me to call security?"

Levi's stormy eyes dared him to say anything and Nile hesitated for a moment before pressing the button on the phone, "That won't be necessary, thank you."

Taking quick strides, Levi approached Nile's desk and leaned heavily against it. "Here's how this is going to work," he started in a growl. "You and I are going to talk like civilized human beings, as hard as that may be for you, and you're going to get on that fucking phone, computer, whichever, and approve those medical grants for Eren."

Nile tried to feign indifference, "I don't have the authority to--"

Levi's hands clenched into fists and Nile flinched when Levi slammed them on the hardwood. "Don't fuck with me, Dok. You own this fucking bank and you personally approve and deny those who apply through it," Levi leaned forward and Nile instinctively leaned away. "I also heard the shit you were whispering in Eren's ear the other night, so trying to act as idiotic as you look won't help you."

Levi pulled back, giving Nile a critical look. It was taking everything inside of him to hold back his fists, all that kept playing in his mind was this man's filthy hands all over Eren.

"And if I refuse?"

"That would be a problem, wouldn't it? But I have ways of fixing that."

Levi leveled his gaze with Nile's, sitting on the edge of his desk. "Do you know what I used to do
for a living before I worked for Erwin Smith? It's not really public knowledge, but I'm sure when you don't have your head stuck up your ass, you know how to use your brain and won't say anything. I used to collect debts, *forcefully*, and not meager ones mind you, large ones. Sort of like the amount you've been evading in your taxes over the past six years."

Levi felt a feral smile curl on his lips as Nile's face turned red, either from embarrassment or anger. It didn't matter. "You don't know what to hell you're talking about! Where's your source on that?"

His *source* was an old friend from his time in Harlem, Oluo, as he kept in contact with him from time to time. The man had a gift of being able to find out the utmost personal and dire information on any person with just a name. He was grateful the man seemed to be more than happy to assist him on some digging into Nile's financial records.

"You don't need to worry about that and I can just let it go in one ear and out the other while you continue to hide behind your father's name. If," Levi punctuated his words with his finger against the desk, "you approve those grants. If you don't, I'll have you sleeping on a fucking bench by next week. I don't give a shit about the bullshit that lies between you and me, this isn't about me, this is about Eren who has been busting his ass trying to save his mother from dying of fucking cancer."

Levi let Nile absorb that information, stepping away to give the man a chance to respond.

"Why are you going out of your way for a whore? I'm not the only person who's hired him, you know. There have been others. What is he to you?"

Nile didn't register Levi moving toward him or the hand that shot out and gripped the back of his head. He felt a sharp pain against his forehead as it was brought against his desk. Nile struggled to bring his face up but Levi kept it firmly in place. "He's more to me then he'll ever be to you and if you ever fucking call him that in my presence again, think about him, look at him, I'll rip your eyeballs out and shove them so far up your ass you'll be seeing your insides."

Levi released his hand harshly, letting Nile's head fall and stepping around. He took the phone and slammed it in front of him. "I suggest you get a-callin'."

Nile rubbed gingerly at his forehead but didn't say anything else, firmly keeping his mouth shut while he turned his attention to the computer screen in front of him. He clicked a few times with the mouse and then reached for the phone, looking at Levi wearily.
"What are you still doing here?" he asked as Levi took a seat in one of the two chairs in front of him.

"I'd like to think I'm a patient man and forgive me if I don't trust you as far as I can throw you, which seems to be far," Levi crossed a leg over until his ankle rested against his other knee. "Don't worry about me, I'll wait."

Armin was starting to become concerned.

Eren had been at his house for a few days and of course, he didn't mind one bit. He and Eren had hit it off from the moment they met and when they were in high school, Mikasa, Eren and him were inseparable. He always enjoyed his company and if there was one thing about Eren Yeager, it was that he was as loyal as they came. So to see his friend in such low spirits really worried him. He hadn't seen Eren this depressed since Grisha passed and Carla was diagnosed.

Eren would only get out of bed to shower or when Armin forced him to eat or drink something. Aside from their first initial conversation, Eren hadn't really spoken much. Pouring his heart out more than likely drained him mentally so Armin figured it was hard to say anything else. There was no spark of life left in his eyes. It just wasn't like Eren to give up and Armin felt that was exactly what he was doing. He encouraged him as much as he could but Eren brushed it off.

Mikasa had attempted to contact him several times throughout the time Eren had been there and Armin ignored the phone calls when Eren begged him to. But his worry was steadily growing and Eren was falling deeper into the hole he was in. Deciding to take a different course, Armin finally called Mikasa back.

"Armin! I've been trying to call you for days! Please tell me Eren is with you!"

"He is, don't worry Mikasa," Armin assented softly.

Armin heard Mikasa sigh happily in relief. "Thank God..." she breathed. "I was so worried, I called everybody looking for him. Let me talk to him."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Armin said as he glanced behind him. It was still early, a little after 10 AM and Eren hadn't come out of the guest room yet. Armin assumed he was still sleeping, so he hoped it gave him enough time to talk.
"Why not?" Mikasa asked and she sounded hurt.

"Look... I'm not going to sugar-coat this, I'm really worried about him, Mikasa. He's hardly left the guestroom, he doesn't eat. I haven't seen him this bad in years and I can't figure out how to help him. Everything I do just doesn't work."

Mikasa took a few seconds to respond. "I didn't realize how much this was hurting him."

"He told me everything that night and it's a lot, Mikasa. Eren has been carrying a lot on his shoulders for over a year and it's just now caught up with him. I just need to think outside of the box here."

"He was here, you know," Mikasa murmured vaguely.

"Who was there?"

"Levi, he came back the house the other morning looking for Eren."

"What?" Armin had to control the rise in his voice. "That changes things! You should have told me that sooner!"

"What do you mean?"

"Did he say why he was looking for Eren?"

"After I chased him with a baseball bat, yes."

Armin groaned miserably. "You didn't actually hit him with it, did you?"

"Of course not. I just... scared him a bit, is all."

"I can't believe you-- no, I can believe it. Anyway, that's not important! Tell me what he said!"
Armin urged.

"He said he wanted Eren happy and that if Eren never wanted to see him again, he'd respect that. He said he was going to make things right," she explained.

"Do you believe him?"

There was a pregnant pause. "As much as I don't want to admit it, I kind of do. And Eren obviously cares about him if he hasn't left the bed in days."

"We'll just have to wait and see what Levi's got planned," Armin clarified.

"I..." Mikasa hesitated. "I think it's a good idea to wait to tell Eren. I'm going to the hospital to meet with Rico and I'd really love it if Eren came with me. I know he doesn't want to see me, but do you think you can get him to the hospital today?"

"If you want to tell him, you can. So you're essentially asking me to sneak a meeting?"

"I would really appreciate it, Armin. It's killing me not to talk to him."

"I'll make it happen, but right now, I need to figure out how I'm getting him out of that bed."

Armin said his goodbyes and hung up, sighing while gazing at the guestroom door. He pondered silently on what he should do. He had attempted to gently coax Eren and that method didn't seem to work. If there was another thing about Eren, it was also that he was quite possibly the most stubborn person he'd ever met. So if his first method hadn't worked, maybe something a bit more forceful would.

Determined, Armin prepared himself before opening the door to the room.

The room was dark and he could see Eren curled up with the covers wrapped wildly around him. Armin saw the phone that was sitting on the nightstand, still powered off. He couldn't imagine how many people had tried contacting him. Eren hadn't so much as stirred when Armin walked in unannounced so he reached for the curtains, tugging them open and revealing a blinding amount of
"What the hell?" Eren groused as he lifted his head quickly.

Armin's face was set intently as he reached for the comforter and ripped it away from the brunette.

"What the fuck, Armin!"

"I'm not going to let you do this to yourself," Armin explained as Eren sat up fully. He dropped the blankets to the floor and crossed his arms over his chest. "I've done all I could but I'm not going to sit here and let you waste away!"

Confusion crossed Eren's face as he said, "I'm... I'm not wasting away."

"You are though and I don't even think you realize it, Eren! I know things seem hopeless right now but come on, you're Eren freaking Yeager! You've never given up before so why are you going to start now of all times? Your mom still needs you, Mikasa is going to lose her mind if she doesn't talk to you soon, so come on!"

_Don't lose that fire that makes you-you._

"We'll figure this out, you've got a ton of people who support you no matter no matter what. If it comes down to it, we'll brainstorm on how we can raise money. You can still see if your job is open if you want to go back. The choices are yours, Eren. So please," Armin offered his hand. "Get up, I can't watch you like this anymore, it isn't you."

Armin felt such a strong wave of relief when some life flicked inside of Eren's eyes, reaching and taking Armin's hand. "You're right... I'm... I'm sorry Armin, I didn't know... I just didn't want to think about any of this anymore."

Eren let Armin pull him to a stand and immediately started pushing him out of the room. "Come on! You're going to eat something, shower and get dressed. After that, we're going to the hospital to see your mother."
"You've got this all figured out, huh?" Eren asked quietly, looking at Armin suspiciously.

"You're damn right I do, so come on!"

Several hours later, Armin was turning his car into the hospital parking lot, sighing softly as he did.

"It's going to take forever to find parking. If you want to, I can drop you off and meet you inside," Armin offered.

Eren had been quiet for the duration of the ride, a bit overwhelmed at Armin's sudden positive burst from earlier. He was glad to have such a good friend to pull him back from depressions clutches. He didn't realize how bad he truly was until Armin had stormed into the room that morning. He felt better after eating a solid (forced) meal and shower. He wore fresh clothes, a red short-sleeved shirt with a swirling design on the side and dark denim jeans. He wore a light zippered hoodie above his shirt, unsure how warm it would be later during the day.

Eren gazed out the window blankly but soon he found his eyes widening in surprise.

When Armin parked the car near the front of the building, he spotted Mikasa standing near the entrance. She appeared uneasy, rubbing her hands together as she saw Armin's car approach. Eren whirled around and glared at Armin.

"What the hell? You set me up!" he accused.

"I did," Armin admitted quietly, but he kept his face firm. "But you two need to talk, Eren. How many days has it been? She's your sister and she loves you. You can be mad at me all you want, but I'm only doing this to help you."

Eren looked at his sister through the window and the anger he felt slowly washed away, sighing as he said, "I'm not mad... I just wasn't expecting to see her today. It's fine, I know you mean well."

"Go on, then," Armin shoved Eren gently. "I'll meet you inside."
Eren slipped out of the car, not bothering to watch as Armin pulled away. Instead, he approached Mikasa. She was wearing a pair of black jeans and a loose-fitting dark sweater. Her hair blew wildly as a gust of wind cut through. "Hi," she said.

"Hey," Eren replied, rubbing a nervous hand against the back of his neck.

"I... I just," Mikasa struggled with her words, looking at Eren helplessly. "I didn't..."

They stood for what seemed like forever and Eren was caught off guard when Mikasa closed the distance between them, throwing her arms around Eren and hugging him close. "Eren, I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have said any of those things to you. I shouldn't have attacked you the way that I did and I'm just--"

"Whoa, Mikasa," Eren suppressed, hugging her tightly. His heart felt elated at her words, trying to hold back his tears and stop himself from smiling. "You don't need to be sorry, I should be instead. I lied to you," he admitted.

"You had every reason to," she said. She pulled back and looked at Eren, whose eyes were shimmering with emotion. "I didn't know you were taking on so much and I... I should have done more for you. For Carla. I wish there was something else I could have done."

"Don't blame yourself, this was my choice."

"I know it was and I hope you know I'd never judge you for your choices. You know how I am, I get into my feelings sometimes, just like you. I didn't react properly and I'm just so sorry for that. If you choose to continue doing this, I won't stop you."

Eren couldn't explain to her just how much those words meant to him. He had run away from everything like a coward and it was Armin who snapped him out of it. He couldn't run from this anymore; couldn't hide. It was time to move forward. "I don't think I can go back, Mika. I don't know if I can handle it anymore after what happened this weekend."

"That's okay," she soothed, taking his hand in hers and rubbing it. "We'll figure this out, I know we will."

The brunette swallowed thickly, holding back whatever onslaught of emotion was hitting him. "We
will," he agreed waterly.

She embraced him again, saying against his shoulder, "I love you and I'm proud of you."

"You're going to make me cry, shit," Eren laughed softly. They stayed like that for a few more seconds before Eren took a deep breath, letting Mikasa go. "Thank you."

"Let's get inside. We can go in and speak to Rico, together, this time."

Mikasa smiled softly, taking Eren's hand and leading him. "Together," he agreed. Eren liked the sound of that this time around.

"Thank you for being patient. It's good to see you Eren and Mikasa, it's been a while," Rico said as she ushered them inside of her office. Eren and Mikasa walked over and took their respective seats while Rico brought herself to her desk and in front of her computer. Armin had offered to wait outside so they could have privacy. She clasped her hands in front of her as looked at them. "What can I do for you both today?"

Eren glanced at Mikasa, who nodded to him. She let him take the reigns on this. "We've hit a financial snag and I- we wanted to see where we stood and if there were any options to possibly raising the funds that are left over," he explained.

Rico nodded, unfolding her hands and swiftly typing on her keyboard. "We'll see where you're at and as far as options, I know we discussed re-applying for medical grants or loans. But there are always other ways; setting something up online can sometimes be very beneficial in cases like this."

Eren grimaced at that, hating the idea of asking for handouts. Mikasa noticed his expression and grasped his hand. "We'll think of something," she assured. "Let's see where we are first."

Eren exhaled quietly and nodded, she was right. Now was not a time to overthink things.

Time stretched as Rico worked quietly, the only sound in the room was her nails against the keyboard and the air conditioning vents above blowing out air. Eren felt uneasy and he shifted in his seat, eyes lowering to the floor in defeat. What the hell was taking so long? It wasn't until Rico made a small noise in the back of her throat did Eren look up.
"Give me a moment," she said while scooting her chair in closer. She adjusted her glasses and looked over the screen in front of her carefully. "It seems there's been a note of changes to your mother's account."

Eren and Mikasa shared a questionable look. "What sort of changes?" Mikasa asked.

Rico brought her hand to her lips and tapped her fingers idly. "I'm seeing something posted in here today, though it hasn't cleared yet. It isn't showing a balance anymore."

"What?" Eren and Mikasa said in unison. Eren let go of Mikasa's hand as he stood up. "That can't be right."

"Our systems aren't usually faulty, so I doubt that's the reason. It's showing three separate transactions processing for approval."

Eren couldn't believe what he was hearing, so he rounded Rico's desk and looked at the monitor himself. His ocean eyes scanned the font in front of him, widening upon the words 'approval', 'pending' and indeed showing the amount being paid in full. Eren felt a dizzy rush course through him. "That's impossible," he whispered.

"Although they're pending, as long as they're showing in our systems, you're free to sign the disclosure work at the front desk. I can contact your mother's doctor on call and let them know the final approval has gone through," Rico explained while lifting her eyes to Eren. "Congratulations, Mr. Yeager. I know how hard your family worked toward this and I'm sure it's a great relief."

Eren's ears were buzzing, casting a look of disbelief toward Rico and then Mikasa. "I..." he tried to speak, unsure of what to say. This didn't make any sense. He hadn't bothered re-applying for a loan or grant since he was originally denied. So what the hell had changed? "Thank you."

Mikasa gently touched Eren's arm and successfully bringing him out of his daze. "Eren, do you understand what this means? Carla can have the surgery now. We need to go find Dr. Liech," she supplied.

Eren didn't need to be told twice and he felt determination flare to life inside of him. He may not have understood how this was possible but he wasn't going to fight against it either. He could sort out the details later, right now, he needed to find his mothers doctor and figure out what their next move was.

She nodded, "Best of luck to you both and your mother. I'll page her doctor now."

They left her office quickly, Armin looking up as they entered the lobby. His brows furrowed questionably as Eren and Mikasa rushed out. "What's going on?"

"I don't have a damn clue," Eren responded honestly. "All I know is I need to find my mom's doctor."

They waited by the front desk in the main lobby, Eren pacing as they did. His heart was hammering inside of his chest and his mind was in several different places at once. He was happy, no, ecstatic to see the words 'paid in full' on that computer screen but he was so confused. Now that this was all finally happening, he was nervous as all hell and couldn't hide it.

Dr. Liech had taken several minutes before exiting the elevator toward the side of the building and approaching Eren, Mikasa, and Armin. "Mr. Yeager, I heard the great news on the approval of your mother's surgery. Why don't we go up to my office and we can discuss the procedure and fill out the necessary paperwork to get this process going? After that, we go to Carla's room and discuss what she needs to prepare for. Given how dire it is to get her on the table with how steadily shes been declining, I'd like to have our surgeons ready and have her prepped before nightfall."

*That soon?! Alright, Eren. You're okay. You've worked for this, remember? No more hiding, time to face reality head-on.*

Eren agreed and he and Mikasa began following Dr. Liech toward the elevators.

"I'm going to call Hannes and let him know what's going on and Grandpa as well. I'm going to spread the word, guys," Armin said while reaching for his phone. "You guys go talk to the doctor. I think this is something that only you two need to be present for."

Eren mouthed a silent 'thank you' and Armin smiled, shaking his head and walking outside to place the phone calls.
When they arrived at Dr. Liech's office, he allowed the two of them to enter first before closing the door behind them. The office was a painful white, sterile in its appearance with a few pictures on his lightly tanned desk and some potted plants on the shelves around the room. There was a couch on the edge of the room that Eren assumed was for late nights and two chairs in front of the desk.

"I'll begin printing out what needs to be signed and while I do that, I'll discuss the procedure."

Eren spared an anxious glance to Mikasa, who urged him to sit next to her. If he didn't sit, he knew he was going to pace the entire time. They listened intently as Dr. Liech went over where they'd make the incision, what parts of the tumor were safe enough to remove without causing further brain damage, and the experimental shrinking mechanism that would be placed inside. That bit of information had Eren squirming in his seat. He knew from previous research what the surgery entailed but hearing it now and having this actually happening made it feel impossible for Eren not to be apprehensive.

"How the device works is simple: it's placed within the parts of the tumor that we cannot remove manually. Over time, it'll cause it to weaken and shrink. There are risks, of course. Which is why we'll need your mother's written permission. As her next of kin, you're to sign as well. There will be a long recovery time. Since she is conscious, we'll go to her room to discuss the rest. Now," Dr. Liech had his hair pulled back in a ponytail and he adjusted his glasses when he sat down at his desk. He asserted a large pile of papers and handed Eren a pen. "You'll sign here and initial here," he began.

Eren nodded, scooting his chair forward and doing as he was instructed. As soon as he did, Dr. Liech flipped to the next page. "Sign here and initial here," he said again. His hand was shaking as he signed, unable to believe this was actually happening. They continued like that for a short time, Dr. Liech directing Eren and Eren signing where it was needed.

"Eren, your hands..." Mikasa noticed gently.

"I understand this is scary, son. But this procedure has had very high success rates. Your mother is a tenacious woman and I have no doubt she'll do fine."

"You mentioned risks..." Eren said. "What risks? I've read up on a few but I'd like to tell us before we go to my mom's room."

Dr. Liech clasped his hands together in front of him and said, "There will always be risks. One of the most concerning is the device malfunctioning. If that were to happen, it would have an instantaneous effect on the brain, particularly the frontal lobe where the tumor resides. But those are rare odds. I
have faith in our surgeons and in Ms. Yeager as well."

"So there is still a chance she can die?" Eren breathed.

"Would you like my honest answer for that? If so, it's yes. But look how far your mother has come and always remember what it took for you to get her here. We are diligently doing what we can for her but without the attempt of this procedure, she will not make it to the end of the year," the doctor explained carefully.

Eren retained that information and did know how much his mother had gone through since the diagnosis and how hard he had worked to get to this moment. He had never let fear dictate his life before and if he started now, it would be catastrophic. All of this stemmed from the same insecurities and the what if's and he couldn't let them get in the way of the one chance his mother could have at living the life she deserved.

Eren's eyes flashed up toward the doctors and he nodded firmly. "You're right, I'm sorry. Let's finish this and go see my mom."

When they entered Carla Yeager's room, she was sitting up in bed with the help of a nurse. The nurse was taking blood samples and adjusting the wires on her head. Carla's tired amber gaze traveled to Dr. Liech, Eren, and Mikasa as they entered the room. Eren's heart sank at the condition his mother was in; she looked as though she had lost substantial weight in just a matter of days and her usually flowing chocolate hair was thinning to the point it's color was unrecognizable. Eren bit his lip, trying to stop them from quivering. Mikasa placed a hand on his shoulder as they walked in.

"Eren, Mikasa," Carla greeted fondly. Her thin lips smiled tiredly, the nurse next to her keeping a firm hold on her as she swayed. How was it possible for someone to lose the very essence of life inside of them so quickly? Eren knew his mother didn't look like this when he left which meant Dr. Liech was right, she was dying. She was very much dying and all Eren could do was hope and pray this was the right decision. He had to trust in himself.

"Hi, Mom," Eren crossed the room and knelt in front of the bed, offering his most sincere smile. He took one of her hands into his. "We've got good news... you're finally going to get the treatment you need."

Carla's expression warped with confusion. "How? I... thought there was still payments that needed to be made?"
"Not anymore," Eren said. "By some miracle, we were approved for financial help and they're going
to do whatever they can to help you."

Carla laughed weakly and Eren ran a hand through her hair lovingly while avoiding the wires. "Dr.
Liech needs to talk to you but I'll just be by Mikasa, okay?"

When Dr. Liech took Eren's spot, he checked over her vitals and looked over the samples the nurse
had taken. "We'll need to give you a physical for medical clearance, which I'm confident you'll pass.
We'll also have an anesthesiologist come in and prep you before we bring you into surgery. I want
you in by tonight, no later than 8 PM. I've already chosen the best surgeons and they are on standby
until then."

His mother, who had always been so fearless and passionate, looked frightened at those words. "So
soon?"

"The sooner the better, Ms. Yeager. We, unfortunately, do not have time on our side in your case. I'll
have your nurse go over a few documents and we'll get this running as smoothly as possible. Put
your trust in us," Dr. Liech explained.

While they began the basic physical on Carla, Hannes had arrived and made his way into the room.
Carla had glanced up and the smile that she wore shined. Eren watched, curious as Hannes kissed
the top of his mother's head and whispered softly into her ear. It had been a long time since he had
seen his mother smile so honestly and even if he wasn't always fond of Hannes, he seemed to make
her happy. When Mikasa tugged his arm, telling him to give Carla and the doctors some privacy,
they both left the room while the physical continued.

When they were out in the hall, Eren exhaled shakily.

"I can't believe this is happening, Mikasa, it doesn't feel real."

"I know," Mikasa murmured. "I know you're scared, I am too. But Dr. Liech seems like he's planned
this all out carefully. We need to believe in their abilities and let them do their job."

"I know," replied Eren.

Mikasa was able to talk Eren into going back toward the main lobby and when they arrived, Armin
and several of their friends were there. Armin's grandfather, Annie, Reiner, and Bertolt were there as well as Sasha, Connie, Jean, and Marco. Eren felt a swelter of affection for his friends fill his senses, unable to believe the amount of support his family really had. Eren and Mikasa walked over to greet them all, some with hearty pats on the back and watered smiles.

"I hope it isn't too much with us being here," Marco said concerned.

Eren shook his head and replied, "Of course not, it means more to me than you all realize."

"Armin told us they're bringing Carla back tonight," Jean cut in, his arms crossed on his chest. Though they didn't initially get along, Eren could see Jean was trying to hide his unsettlement.

"They are. They're getting her ready now, Mikasa and I thought it'd be better if we gave the doctors some space."

Jean nodded and looked like he wanted to say more. Instead, he tapped his finger on his elbow and said, "I'm sure it'll all work out."

Eren chuckled, "Thanks, Horseface."

Jean scoffed, turning away. "If you didn't have all of this shit going on, I'd kick your ass for that. But I'll let it slide tonight."

Eren watched Jean saunter over to Mikasa, Connie, and Sasha. He tilted his head when Mikasa smiled at him and then shot a pointed look to Eren as he gaped at her. It was well known that Jean had feelings for Mikasa but Eren was bewildered to see Mikasa openly displaying herself to him. Eren took the warning and looked away, knowing he really had no room to tell anybody who they should be with. Mikasa was finally open to his choices, he should be with hers as well.

Eren didn't know what time it was when Dr. Liech came to meet them in the lobby, but everyone turned their attention to him on his arrival. "They're going to bring her back now, so if you'd like to see her before then, you should go now."

Eren and Mikasa split from the group, who agreed they'd be in the waiting area when they came back. They followed Dr. Liech back to his mother's room and they were already rolling Carla out on a stretcher and toward general surgery with Hannes walking behind them. Eren and Mikasa ran over
and moved along with the moving stretcher.

"Everything's going to be fine, honey," Carla soothed and she reached out to take Eren's hand. Eren grasped it and kissed her knuckles.

"I know it is," Eren whispered. He felt tears trailing down his cheeks, both of happiness and fear. "I'll be here when you get out, I love you."

"Remember what I told you, be strong for me."

*I'm trying, Mom. I really am.*

Carla turned her head toward Mikasa and said, "Keep an eye on him for me, okay? I love you both."

Eren wanted to say more but one of the surgeons stopped him before they moved passed the secured doors. "We can't let you go any further, son. We'll take care of her."

Eren, Mikasa, and Hannes were left behind as they wheeled Carla Yeager past those doors and into surgery.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I can come up with enough thanks to each and every one of you who commented sent kudos and really took the time to read this story. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.
Chapter Notes

There is an epilogue to this so it doesn't end here! Thank you all so much, I seriously can't thank you all enough. This story turned out to be so much more successful than I originally thought and it makes me happy to know I could reach out and create something you'd enjoy. So I know I'm always saying it in each chapter, but know I am grateful!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The wait was maddening.

It had taken several hours for the surgical team to place Carla under anesthesia, prepare the incision site and get themselves ready to operate. By the time they had actually begun working on her, it was well into the middle of the night. Eren knew the procedure itself would take several hours so it didn't surprise him when he glanced at the clock.

Throughout the night, he spoke with several of his friends. They offered a wonderful distraction since Eren felt so restless. Sasha and Connie had brought them food, though Sasha gazed upon the sandwiches with hungry eyes and Eren chuckled knowingly, handing her half and saying his thanks. Armin was able to leave and retrieve his belongings from his house and bring them back for Eren. Reiner, Annie, and Bertolt stepped in when Sasha and Connie had to leave and offered hearty conversation. Once they left, he conversed with Jean and Marco.

It went on like that for several hours until their large group of friends dissipated and only Eren, Mikasa, Hannes and Armin were left. Armin's grandfather had brought coffee from the cafeteria and told Armin he was leaving for the night. Eren was grateful for such incredible friends and more grateful that the fear of them seeing the video that was floating somewhere on the internet wasn't brought up once. Perhaps they hadn't seen it or they knew now wasn't the time to speak of it.

The hours went by slowly into the very early morning. Armin was reading on his phone while Hannes was sitting in one of the chairs, snoozing on and off with his arms crossed. Mikasa had stepped away momentarily to get herself something to drink and Eren stood up, beginning to pace.

He was tired and he should close his eyes, but his body was wired. Perhaps drinking all of that offered coffee was a bad idea.
Mikasa came back and offered Eren a cup. He scrunched his nose and said, "I don't think I should have any more caffeine. I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin."

She laughed softly. "Relax, it's decaffeinated tea. You look like you could use something to calm down."

When Eren took the cup he couldn't help it, he thought of Levi and looked at the tea nostalgically.

"Let's sit outside for a minute, get some fresh air," Mikasa suggested.

There were several people going in and out of the hospital, even at this hour. The sky was still dark but small streaks of orange were beginning to break through as they stepped out. There were several benches along the hospital property and Eren followed Mikasa and sat down next to her. They gazed at the sky, Eren sipping idly at his tea and slowly feeling his tense body relax.

"There's something I want to tell you," Mikasa murmured softly. She placed her own styrofoam cup against her lap. "I don't want you to get mad at me for waiting to bring this up."

Eren looked at her now, perplexed. "Okay," he said unsurely.

Her dark eyes met his and said, "Levi came by the house looking for you a few days ago, the morning after you left."

Eren had to grip his cup before it slipped out of his hands, his breath catching. "What?"

Mikasa noted that Eren didn't look angry if anything he looked at her with disbelief. "I didn't tell you right away because when I spoke with Armin, he told me how bad you had taken all of this. He said you didn't leave the bed for days and wouldn't eat. I was worried how you'd take Levi looking for you and with everything that's happened, I needed you to focus on this. I didn't want you distracted. But I promise you I wasn't trying to withhold it for any other reason than that."

"What... did he say?"

Mikasa paused, deciding to leave out the bit of her chasing Levi with a bat before answering, "That
he wanted you happy and that he was going to make this right."

Eren turned his head, staring at the concrete in incredulity. "That doesn't make any sense... why would he..."

"I heard the things he said to you," she stated. "When I watched that video, I saw how badly he hurt you. It made me so angry to watch you fall apart like that. But when I saw Levi the other day, I saw the conviction in his eyes, Eren. I don't think he meant to say the things he did. I think he was too blinded by his anger to think straight."

"Then why can't he just tell me that?" Eren demanded.

"When was the last time you turned your phone on? Do you even have it? How do you know he hasn't tried calling you?" Mikasa inquired.

Eren blinked and patted his back pocket, realizing he indeed didn't have his phone with him. He didn't even remember bringing it with him when Armin and he went to the hospital earlier the day before. "I... don't know, now that you mention it."

Mikasa said gently, "I want to believe that before all of this happened, you were happy with him. You seemed happier when you were home. I don't know anything about him other than what I've read online but he seemed genuinely upset and worried when you weren't there. I want to believe what he said was true, that he wants you happy."

"I..." Eren didn't know how to process this information, hundreds of questions racing through his mind.

"I want us to be more honest with each other," Mikasa said. "I want you to be able to trust me and I'll try to step out of the way and let you live your life without overbearing you. In the end, I want you to be happy too. Even if it's with him and I'll do my best to accept it."

Eren looked at Mikasa with a sense of wonderment, his heart thankful for her sentiments. "Thank you, Mika," were the only words he could form.

The light was filtering into the hospital and inside the waiting room, indicating that morning was
upon them. Eren was pacing enough to start breaking in the floor, not only with the worry of his mother but the confusion of what he and Mikasa had discussed. His head was spinning. Hannes and Mikasa had gone back several times throughout the night to check on Carla's progress but were always turned away, being told they'd be called if anything changed. The eerily quiet hospital was now starting to boom to life as normal business hours were resumed.

*Is it really 8 AM? Why is this taking so long? I read that brain surgery can usually run 6-8 hours. It's been almost 12.*

Eren needed to keep in mind the nature of the operation and that it wasn't a usual procedure. The doctor had told them to expect this but it didn't put Eren at ease. He just hoped everything was going well. Not being able to go back and check the progress himself was killing him.

So the brunette utilized his time, going to financing and finding out the information as to which bank had accepted his applications. His thoughts screeched to a halt when he found out it was Wayward Bank, immediately recognizing it as the banks Nile Dok owned. *That can't be right...*  

Eren was grateful that Armin put his phone inside his backpack. He took a steady breath and turned the device on, wondering how many messages or voicemails he'd have.

He was happy to see there weren't any hateful messages or crank calls while the phone was off. He searched for Wayward Bank's main number and stepped away to dial it. On the second ring, a flat voice answered, "Wayward Bank, how may I direct your call?"

"Hi, um, actually I'm calling about some grants I applied for," he started, unsure. "I, well, I don't remember re-applying for them after I was declined so I just wanted to know what had changed."

"Hold please."

It didn't take long for the line to pick up, a more cheerful voice greeting, "Nile Dok's office, Leila speaking, how can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm calling to follow-up on some grants I was approved for..." Eren said.

"I can help you with that, sir. Your name?"
Eren heard the woman typing and he paced around the corridor he was in. "Well, Mr. Yeager, it looks like you applied for three separate grants. All of which were approved yesterday by Mr. Dok himself."

"That can't be right," Eren argued immediately, unless...

"It's all on file, sir. I can email you the forms if you'd like."

"How can I suddenly be approved after I was declined? I'm not following the logic here."

"You know... Mr. Dok was acting strangely yesterday," her voice slipped from her professional tone to one of wonderment. "He's been acting off since his visit to New Hampshire. I wonder if it had anything to do with that man who came in yesterday."

"What man?" Eren pressed, feeling tense all over again.

"This man came in here yesterday morning and just stormed his way right into Mr. Dok's office," she huffed unprofessionally. "It was incredibly rude."

"What did he look like?" Eren egged her on, not believing his luck on how incredibly oblivious this woman was. She evidently was terrible at her job to be giving out such personal information. "Was he short, sort of has a scowl on his face?"

"Yes! You described him perfectly, he looked so angry. He was handsome as can be even though--"

Eren didn't listen anymore, his ocean eyes wide as he slid down the wall he was pressed against. 

He hung up, tired of hearing such a squeaky voice in his ear. When he looked at his phone again, he noticed the voicemail icon blinking in the left corner of his screen. He clicked it and brought the
"You have twelve new voicemails, first new message March 13th at 12:26 AM."

The first several messages were Mikasa, which hadn't surprised Eren. He didn't listen to them, instead just deleting them and moving on. It wasn't until he reached his last message did his breath hitch inside of his throat.

"Eren," Levi's voice filtered his consciousness like a river, rendering him still in his place on the floor. "I know you've been keeping your phone off to avoid me, and I don't blame you. I don't even know where to hell to begin with all of this so I'll start with what's important. I didn't mean any of the things I said to you the other night, even though you probably thought I did. Seeing Nile with his fucking hands all over you set me off and it turned me into an idiot. I never looked down on you for being an escort, I actually always thought you were strong for it. And if you were to continue with it, I wouldn't stop you. Because that doesn't define you."

Eren felt the stinging of his tears but continued to listen.

"I went to Nile myself not because I pitied you, but because you deserved the chance to live with a clean slate. You deserve to be able to choose your own future and whether you want me to be in it or not is up to you. I'll respect your decisions no matter what they are. Because you are strong, and courageous and probably the most beautiful fucking person I've ever met in my life. When I met you, I never would have thought we'd up here. But I'm glad we did."

Eren brought a hand to his mouth to stop the noise that threatened to spill, several hospital staff and visitors passing him in the hallway.

"I'm not good at this, brat. I'm a shitty choice. But I think we've learned a lot from each other and can continue to do so. I've never felt like this before I met you. It sort of scares the shit out me, but I'm here and when you feel you're ready, I'll be waiting for you. And when you are ready, I'll say those words back to you because I refuse to say them over a voicemail. I want to say them in person."

The voicemail had ended and Eren clenched the phone in his hands so tightly his knuckles were white. Mikasa was right, Levi still cared about him and wanted this to work. Eren couldn't believe that for days he spiraled into such a state of depression and all along Levi was trying to reach out to him. How could Eren not believe through their tender moments together that Levi didn't feel the same way?
I won't do it again, Eren thought. I won't let him go again.

It was at 8:34 AM that Dr. Liech, along with two of the surgeons that had been present for Carla's operation, emerged into the waiting room. Eren, Mikasa, Hannes, and Armin all stood up from their seats, looking expectantly at the doctor. His face remained impassive for a few moments and Eren felt dread coil inside of his stomach. Eren instinctively reached for Mikasa, holding one of her hands and biting his lip.

Dr. Liech smiled and Eren let out a laugh of astonishment. "She's okay?"

"She's just fine, she's in recovery right now. As expected, she did wonderfully. It'll be a long road to recovery but I think Ms. Yeager has a long time ahead of her."

Mikasa wrapped her arms around him, holding back her own tears and laughing along with Eren. Eren turned and hugged Hannes and then Armin. He couldn't stop himself, so cheerful and amazed at the wonderful news. All those months of struggling and fighting were all moments he was thankful for. If Annie hadn't offered the job and he hadn't met Levi, Eren didn't think any of this would be possible. Eren had never believed in fate but at the moment, he felt it strongly.

"Can we see her?" Eren asked.

Dr. Liech nodded and said, "Of course. We took more time as we wanted to see how she'd come off the anesthesia and how well she adjusted to the changes. She's surprisingly alert though, so you should be able to speak with her. We have IV's set up for morphine so she should be relatively comfortable."

Eren started following the doctor but stopped when Mikasa and Hannes didn't move. "Aren't you guys coming?"

"We think you should go first," Mikasa stated with a smile. "We'll wait out here."

Eren glanced between the two of them. "You're sure?"

"We're sure. Go see your mother, kid. We'll be here," Hannes encouraged with a grin of his own.
Eren nodded gratefully and left the waiting room. They had moved Carla to another floor so Eren took the elevator, excitement bellowing through him. He couldn't believe how elated he felt; all the weight he felt on his shoulders lifting and the veil of doubt disappearing. When he finally arrived at her new room, Eren could see several monitors set up around her bed. There was several of the staff moving about the room, making it as comfortable as possible and set up the necessary stations. Eren looked at Dr. Liech, who offered Eren a steady smile.

His mother was laying down, propped enough where she could see the door. There were several bandages tightly wrapped around her head and the wires from earlier remained, but Eren could see there weren't nearly as many as before. They had dressed her in a new hospital gown and her hair was pulled back to adjust with the wrappings. Her IV’s remained and though she looked exhausted, her eyes, despite just coming out of surgery, were shaper; focused.

They landed on Eren and Carla smiled happily. "Hi, honey."

Eren hugged her, minding the IVs and wires. He was so beyond thankful for this moment, scared for so long his mother would die before her time. Nobody deserved that fate, no matter how cruel the world was. But here she was, alive and able to see her future. He was thankful to the hospital, Dr. Liech and the surgeons who worked diligently to ensure her survival. "I'm so happy you're okay," Eren whispered.

"I am too," she admitted softly. She reached up and petted Eren's chestnut hair. "I told you everything was going to be alright. I felt it," she added.

"I did too," Eren replied gently. He pulled back from her and his eyes softened. "How're you feeling? How's..." he raised a hesitant hand toward her head but didn't touch it.

"Well, I have metal in my head. Not everybody can say that. I feel tired and I have a dull headache that Dr. Liech said is normal."

Eren rolled his eyes. "You have a terrible sense of humor, you know that? Too soon for metal jokes," he quipped.

"It got you to laugh, so it's worth it," she said weakly. She looked at Eren and then down toward the bed. "I know this has been hard on you. On your sister and everyone else. You've always fought for me, Eren. I just... I can't begin to tell you how incredibly proud of you I am. I don't know how you both managed to make this happen. I think I'm still in a state of shock," she admitted.
"We all are, this happened so fast. And you're handling everything so well."

"I may be handling it well but I feel the effects. Dr. Liech explained it'll be a few weeks before I can go home. They'll need to monitor me and make sure the device does its job. I can't lie and say I don't miss my own bed."

Eren made sure to remember that and get the house ready and clean before his mother came home. He was sure he and Mikasa could rip through the house to get it prepared. He wanted to make sure while his mother recovered, she was as comfortable as possible.

"How are things at home? Work?" Carla pressed. "I miss talking to you... I know you've been through a lot because of this."

"Home is good, I was actually just thinking me and Mikasa are going to tackle and get it ready for when you're discharged. Work, ah... well, I guess I'm out of a job right now. But I'll find something quick," he assured.

"And Levi?" she asked. Eren's heart thrummed and his eyes were on Carla's, though they were groggy they were curious. "How is he?"

"Um..." Eren fidgeted, his hands wringing together. "We actually... had a falling out a few days ago."

Carla reached to stop him from fidgeting with his hands, attempting to sit up. Several monitors started beeping and Eren coaxed her to lay back down. "Don't move, Mom. You'll rip all of your IVs out! Jeez, remember you just came out of brain surgery?"

She scoffed, God, his mother was the most stubborn woman he'd ever met besides Mikasa. "What happened?"

"Just... I don't know, it's complicated?" he offered, hoping she'd accept just that. Of course, she didn't. Eren was suddenly wondering if maybe the morphine was making her act like this and then remembered this was his mother he was thinking of.
"That's not an... explanation," she replied while trying to get comfortable again.

Eren sighed, knowing she wouldn't give up on this. "Look, we weren't honest with each other and things just... happened. Now's not the time, Mom. You need to worry about resting and not my love life."

"So you admitted you love him?"

Eren bit back a groan. "Yes, okay, I did. Not in the most conventional way either."

"Does he love you back?"

Eren glanced at Carla, seeing how tired she looked. But she also looked... sad for him. Eren didn't want her to worry about something this while she was recovering.

"I... I think so," he admitted.

"Then why aren't you with him?" she asked.

Eren looked at his mother incredulously. "Mom, you just had a 12-hour operation and you're worried about this?"

"I was right," his mother sighed to herself. "You are more stubborn than me."

Eren's brows knitted questionably at the statement. "Excuse me?"

"Sweetheart, I'm going to be okay. Dr. Liech told you that already. You should go and talk to Levi."

"What? No! I'm not going anywhere. This is where I should be," he argued.

"Eren, I'm not going anywhere. I already told you... I'll be here for weeks. Hannes is here and so is
Mikasa, there'll always be someone here for me. You have no reason to worry about me, I'm going to be just fine. So why are you still here, honey?"

Eren was trying to make sense of his mother's words and why she was so insistent on this. Was it obvious that even though he was so incredibly joyful of his mother's recovery, he still appeared hurt? He couldn't lie and say he didn't feel the loss of Levi everywhere he went. It ached, it whispered, it churned inside of him. After everything Levi had said in his voicemail, Eren would have taken off running to him right then and there. But he knew this was where he needed to be.

Or at least, at the time it was. His mother was of sound mind, despite everything. She was on the road to getting well again and she was finally, for the first time in years, well off. Eren didn't need to be frightened anymore of seizures, blood clots, headaches, any of it. It was as Levi said, a clean slate for his mother as well.

Carla was looking at Eren expectantly, patting his hand with her own. "Go find him, Eren."

Eren gripped her hand gently, battling himself inside before nodding and moving to wrap his arms around her. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too. Now go," she shooed him, pushing him with what little strength she had. "I feel like I can rest a little now."

When Eren emerged back into the waiting room, Hannes and Mikasa looked at him expectantly.

"She's okay," Eren reassured brightly. "More than okay, actually. She's talking and everything. You wouldn't believe they just performed surgery on her."

Mikasa sighed deeply in relief and Hannes chuckled. "Your mother is as tough as they come, can't say I'm surprised."

"She may have finally fallen asleep, but you guys should go see her. I..." Eren paused, eyes shifting to Mikasa. "Do you mind if I borrow the car?"

Mikasa frowned a bit and said, "I was planning on calling out of work and getting some things from the house for Carla."
"Oh, um..." Eren rubbed the back of his head, hiding the flush that brightened his cheeks. "I just... well..."

Hannes could sense Eren getting flustered. He reached into his pocket and said, "Here," while tossing his keys to Eren. "Take my car. I don't plan on leaving anytime soon. Just don't scratch her up, I still plan on sellin' that thing."

Eren caught his keys with one hand, giving him a grin. "I'll try," he replied. He walked back a bit and said, "I'll see you guys later."

Eren had missed the knowing look that crossed Mikasa's features as she smiled.

When Eren arrived at Levi's apartment, he rapped on the door loudly. He stood out in the hallway, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he waited. His eyebrows drew together and he knocked again but received no answer. He pulled out his phone and felt stupid for not realizing it was a weekday. Levi was more than likely working. He hadn't attempted to contact Levi at all and decided now was the time. He browsed his contacts and tapped on the name...

...and it went to voicemail.

"You have got to be kidding me right now!" Eren screamed in the hallway, not caring if any of Levi's neighbors heard. He hung up, tapping Levi's name once more and it went to voicemail once again. Eren let out a frustrated whine, not believing this. "I thought we were done playing games!" he snapped.

Eren walked back over to Hannes's car, leaning against it as he decided to try Levi's work number. He had never called it before but he did have it in his contacts. He brought the phone to his ear and was happy when it started ringing. By the third ring, he heard the line finally click.

"Hello! Levi Ackerman's office," an overly cheerful voice greeted. Eren had to move to phone away from him, wincing. That... had been unexpected, but he was also sure he recognized that voice.

"Uh," Eren started lamely. "Hange?"
"The one and only! Who might this be?" they inquired.

Eren cleared his throat. "It's Eren. Eren Yeager?"

"Oh my goodness, hi there! I don't think I've seen you since... well, all that crazy stuff happened!"

"What are you doing answering Levi's phone?" Eren couldn't help but ask. He was sure Levi would be livid at the thought of Hange being in his office at all if he wasn't there.

"Oh, well I needed some paperwork so I just let myself in. I'm sure he won't mind."

Sure he won't.

"Listen, is Levi in? I'm at his apartment and he's not here. I... I really need to talk to him. It's important."

"Well, it may have to wait, sweetheart. Levi's probably boarding a plane to Los Angeles right about now."

"What?!" Eren exclaimed. "Right now? Seriously? How long will he be gone?"

"A few weeks, I believe. Possibly the month."

No! I can't wait a damn month to see him! I have to see him now!  

"Hange, look. I need you to tell me exactly when his flight leaves and which one he's on," Eren said urgently, reaching into Hannes's car to find something to write with and a piece of paper. Eren ruffled through the glove box and found a napkin and figured that would do.

"You're going to have to give me a minute to find out, sugarplum," Hange responded. From where Eren was, he could tell Hange was typing. They must have helped themselves to Levi's computer. After a few seconds, Hange said, "It says here his flight is at 9:45 AM and its gate 38C."
Eren scribbled the time and gate down, bringing his phone down to look at the time. It was already 9:20 AM. He had 25 minutes to get all the way to the airport and it was easily a half hour from where he was. "Alright, thank you, Hange."

"Honey, why don't you just wait for him to come back? I don't think you're going to make it in time from Levi's place."

"Oh, I'll make it," Eren assured them, saying goodbye and hanging up the phone. He slipped inside of the car, adjusting his seat and mirror and reversing out of the parking lot. He wasn't even on the highway yet and he was already speeding. Rounding corners at terrible angles and turning right on red without bothering to look. If he didn't get his head clear he was going to get into an accident. Focus, you can make it. Just go a little faster on the highway.

The highway wasn't any better, Eren getting frustrated as he was stuck behind several vehicles going below the speed limit. "Come on!" Eren shouted while leaning on his horn. Luckily that seemed to get the message across and cars moved aside for him. When he was finally accelerating past 60MPH, he felt the car shake terribly. He had forgotten with a car old as this one, it probably didn't have the ability to maintain top speed anymore. Eren groaned miserably, torn between pushing his foot all the way down and afraid of fucking up Hannes's car. "Dammit! Can't this thing go any faster!?"

It was as if the universe just wanted to stop him but Eren wasn't giving up. He needed to see Levi face to face. Needed to tell him exactly what he wanted and tell him how incredibly happy and in love with him he was. He needed to thank him for not giving up on him the way Eren felt he was ready to give up. A phone call wouldn't suffice, he needed to actually see him.

Eren glanced at the radio, the time reading 9:37 AM and he ground his teeth, maneuvering the car around others and approaching the exit for the airport. He had 8 damn minutes.

He finally approached the front of the airport, putting the car in park and stepping out of it. As he ran toward the doors someone yelled behind him, "Sir, you can't park here! This is pick up only!"

Eren looked at the security guard yelling at him, toward the doors and back at him again. "Tow it!" he shouted and turned away, running inside without sparing a glance, leaving behind a bewildered man scratching his head. He just didn't have the time to stand there and find a freaking parking spot.

"Hannes is going to castrate me," Eren muttered to himself. He'd have to worry about it later. When Eren was inside, his eyes wandered anxiously. It wasn't as crowded as when he and Levi had last
been here but there was still enough people to where Eren had a hard time navigating. He had only been to this airport a few times so he wasn't very familiar with its layout. He pulled out the crumpled napkin from his pocket and looked up toward the lit up boards with the flight names and times.

"38C... 38C..." he whispered to himself over and over again. Eren's emerald eyes widened when he spotted the familiar flight number, next to it showing the gate number and that it was indeed boarding. Second floor.

Eren didn't bother with an escalator, instead, running past several people on the stairs. Many people shot glares his way but he didn't give a damn, he had less than 5 minutes at this point and each second mattered. He looked like a trainwreck, his hair tousled from not brushing it and his clothes wrinkled from being in them overnight. He hadn't eaten anything since last night and he went from days of sleeping to not sleeping at all the night prior. Thank God he brushed his teeth in one of the restrooms at the hospital or else he'd be really disgusted. If Levi did see him, he'd probably be horrified by his appearance.

The brunette pushed those thoughts aside as he reached the security area, groaning and running a hand down his face. Shit, he had forgotten about this. He needed to get to the front of that line. He heard people grumbling and scoffing as he pushed his way through, ignoring their protests. He didn't have any luggage with him so he was silently hoping they'd just let him through. Of course, everything seemed to be defying Eren's intentions as he reached the front of the line and approached the metal detectors.

"Boarding pass," the security guard drawled in a bored tone.

Eren's blood ran cold. "I... I don't have one--"

"If you don't have one, you're not getting through. You can purchase one downstairs, otherwise, next!"

"Wait!" Eren held his hands in front of the guard, getting his attention again. "Listen, I just need to talk to somebody, please. It's important."

"I don't care if it's a matter of life and death. Airport regulations, if you don't have a boarding pass, you're not getting through," the man said matter-of-factly, waving the person behind Eren forward. "Next!"
Eren's hands balled into fists, his eyes darting for some sort of way to get through. When he noticed the belt along the metal detector, Eren's mind short-circuited and all he could do was move. He pushed himself up, running along the belt and then jumping down on the other side of the detector.

"Hey!" the security guard shouted, wanting to run after him but not being able to move from his post. Several other airport officers caught sight of the situation and immediately moved to intervene. Eren broke out in a wild dash, yelling, "I'm sorry!" over his shoulder.

_Holy shit! What the hell am I doing? I'm breaking so many laws right now!_

Airport security was not a joke and he knew this. Still, Eren found himself running, his eyes occasionally glancing back at the men chasing him and looking up toward the signs above the terminals. He was lucky that he was faster than the men running behind him otherwise he would have surely been caught by now. Their pace was slowing a bit but they didn't relent. Several individuals around him were either staring or gasping and moving out of his way. Eren knew he was more than likely going to face consequences because of this.

Levi's gate had finally come into view and Eren could have cried out with relief, turning abruptly in his path and sprinting toward the terminal. There was no line or waiting which indicated everyone had already boarded. That didn't stop the brunette though, as he ran past the attendants standing by the entryway without so much as sparing a glance. They looked at Eren incredulously and watched as security ran behind him.

Levi sighed, already feeling tendrils of dread flowing through him. He glanced down at the book in his hand and waited for the pilot to shut the hell up with how nice the weather was or which course they'd be flying in. He knew this flight would be a long one and he just hoped he had packed enough sleeping pills to knock him out. He pulled the bookmark out, trying to focus on the pages in front of him but finding it impossible. He had been hoping he'd hear from Eren before he left but he supposed he couldn't blame him for not reaching out. Perhaps Levi had misread all of the signs and Eren didn't want this in the end.

The last place he wanted to go to was California. It was too hot and humid for his tastes and the atmosphere itself was entirely different than what he was used to. Levi really hoped Erwin was right and that Zackly would keep him busy enough to make the time pass quickly.

Several hushed whispers and gasps caught Levi's attention and he looked up from his book to see several occupants looking out their windows. Curiosity got the better of Levi and he leaned forward to look as well. When he did, his eyes narrowed and his lips pressed into a line. Some idiot was being chased by airport security, running straight through the terminal.
It was when that idiot ran closer that Levi's expression started to change. His eyes widening and his mouth slowly falling open.

*Is that... no, it can't be. Eren?*

He watched from the window as Eren ran through the terminal and toward the plane, several bulky men following behind him. Levi couldn't tear his eyes away or seem to move his jaw back into place. It wasn't until Levi heard the commotion from the front of the plane that he snapped out of his daze.

"Levi!" Eren called out, holding onto the front seats of the plane. He looked relieved when he and Levi made eye contact. He hadn't been standing long before he was tackled to the floor, his face bring pressed painfully to the ground.

"Hey!" Levi shouted, standing from his seat and moving toward where the security officers were holding Eren. "Is it really necessary for you to be man-handling him like that!"

Levi suddenly felt the wind knocked out of him, his body being forced to the ground and his chin connecting with it harshly. He hissed and looked up, seeing one of the airport officers had moved and restrained him upon his outburst. Probably not the best idea to get involved but seeing Eren being attacked by armed officers certainly didn't help him any. Levi's mind was racing when his eyes met Eren's, who grinned at him.

"Hi," Eren breathed, his face still being pushed against the surface beneath.

"Hi?! Are you fucking shitting me right now? Have you lost your mind? No, you know what, don't answer that!" Levi shouted, his face contorting with disgust as his cheek scraped against the floor. His arms were brought behind him and handcuffs were tightened around his wrists. They had done the same to Eren, who was still looking at Levi despite their situation and smiling as they were brought to their feet and escorted off the plane.

A half an hour later, Levi and Eren were sitting side by side in a brightly lit room with only the chairs they were sitting in and a table. Levi assumed it was an interrogation room for any criminals or drugs smugglers, though he was sure there hadn't been a case like this before. They were questioned thoroughly and left alone for a majority of the time. They had moved their cuffs from behind their them to their front, which Levi was grateful for. His eyes cast to the side, looking as Eren's face twitched and his fingers flexed. He was practically vibrating.
"You look like you're about to fucking spontaneously combust," he commented dryly.

Eren didn't say anything. Instead, he brought a hand to his mouth and his body shook with a solid effort. Levi sighed, shaking his head.

"Just let it out and get it over with."

Eren started laughing, doubling over and placing his arms on his stomach. The incredulity of the situation rendered him hysterical. There were small tears of mirth collecting on the corners of his turquoise eyes, a hand moving up to wipe them away. He couldn't stop, a delightful feeling of relief washing over him as he continued to giggle madly. With everything that had happened, Eren couldn't help it. "I can't believe I just did that!" he said between breaths.

"You'd better hope they don't toss you in jail. With an ass like yours, I doubt you'd last very long." Levi said. Instead of upsetting Eren, it seemed the statement made him laugh harder.

Levi couldn't stop his shoulders from shaking, trying to hold back his own snickers at Eren's contagious laughter. Soon he was laughing earnestly and if anybody else had been in the room, they would have thought the two of them were absolutely mad. But soon, their laughter died down, Eren's body relaxing a bit.

"I hope you won't get in trouble for missing your flight," Eren eventually said.

Levi shrugged. "I think you should be more worried about going to jail. But, I'm not worried, Erwin will just send someone in my place. I didn't want to go anyway."

Eren nodded and looked at the floor, accepting his answer.

"Why are you here, Eren?" Levi asked, his tone somewhat distant.

Eren contemplated his response and decided honesty was the best way. "I got your message today... you're right, I've had my phone off."

Levi nodded mutely, unsure of what to say to Eren's response.
"My mother also had her surgery last night," Eren continued.

Levi regarded him, surprised. "So soon?"

Eren smiled as he answered, "It was a success, and it's thanks to you."

"I didn't do anything, I just went to make sure Nile didn't fuck with you anymore. You did all of the work, in the end, brat."

"That's not true," Eren murmured. "If I hadn't met you... I don't think things would have turned out this way. I'm--" he cut himself off, his hands resting on his knees as he continued, "I shouldn't have lied to you, I should have said--"

"Don't," Levi interrupted. "you dare blame yourself. This was on me, not you."

"Why did you keep paying me?" Eren had to ask.

Levi’s eyebrows twitched and he said, "I didn't know how else to keep you around."

"So why didn't you just say something?"

"Because I'm not good at this," Levi responded earnestly, his gray eyes meeting Eren's. "Like I said, I'm a shitty choice, Eren."

"You're not though," Eren said as he scooted his chair closer. "You came for me, Mikasa told me."

A small smirk quirked on Levi’s lips. "Did she mention the part where she chased me with a baseball bat?"

"What -- no!" Eren looked horrified. "You're joking, right?"
Levi chuckled, "Afraid not. I have to say if insanity runs in any family, it's yours. Can't deny she loves the hell out of you, though."

Eren groaned into his hands. "I can't believe her..."

"You just ran through an airport and broke how many laws and you're upset with her?"

"No, I..." Eren's fingers picked at his jeans as he averted his eyes. "Dammit, we're both terrible at this."

"No argument there," Levi conceded.

Silence fell on them like a blanket and Levi could see Eren was struggling to say something.

"I wish we met under different circumstances," he admitted softly.

Levi had finally turned fully toward him, leaning close as he said, "I think these were the circumstances we were meant to meet under." He was so close... Eren could feel his warm breath against his lips. "I told you why I did the things I did... and that you deserved to choose your future, no matter the obstacles. So the question is still the same," his eyes flicked to Eren's. "What do you want, Eren?"

That question triggered a memory, a beautiful memory of being gathered in Levi's arms. His face was set determinedly and he answered, "You."

Levi's eyes searched his, penetrating and sharp. With the handcuffs, Levi was still able to raise his hands and gently brush Eren's cheek. "And I want you, but I have to say it right now, I'm getting sick and tired of sharing you, brat."

Eren closed his eyes at Levi's touch. "I know, but I'm not going back."

"No?" Levi murmured. *So close.*
"No," Eren said steadily, his face nuzzling against Levi's.

Lips were brushing against his temple, soft and demanding at the same time. Eren felt like his pulse could be heard in the room. "I love you," Levi breathed against his skin. There was a tightening in his chest and his breath hitched inside of his throat.

"Say it again," Eren whispered, his hands reaching up to cup over Levi's. He felt real tears forming, his lips quivering with anticipation. "Please."

"I love you," Levi repeated. He pulled back just enough to look into Eren's ocean orbs, his piercing gaze looking right into his soul.

Their hands were lightly touching each other's faces, the room they were in forgotten. Eren had to control the tremor in his voice as he responded, "I love you too."

Their lips met, finally, finally, soft and unyielding. Levi exhaled noisily and Eren whimpered as Levi's hands carded through his hair, dragging him closer and savoring the taste. Their eyes fluttered to a close and Eren marveled at the loving touches that were left in the wake of Levi's hands, the paralyzing feeling of his lips massaging against his own. Eren's hands reached back, burying into Levi's shirt and meeting him desperately. His heart was saying yes yes yes.

The sound of a door opening had Levi pulling back from Eren, an annoyed scowl present on his lips. One of the airport security officers cleared his throat and stepped into the room. He held keys in his hand and simply said, "You both check out, you're free to go. Your belongings will be at your original check-in station."

He unlocked their cuffs, stepping back and giving the two of them room to move.

"Oi," Levi said and the man looked at Levi questionably. "Shut the door for a minute, would you?"

Eren eyed Levi quizzically but the officer did as he was instructed, leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

"Wha--" Eren started to ask but was cut off when Levi slotted his lips against his own again. Eren
moaned, his now free hands moving to the back of Levi's neck, dragging him as close as he could. His fingertips shook, his mind swimming wonderfully as Levi's tongue pushed past his lips and tasted the inside of Eren's mouth. Eren's heart was beating soundly, happily as Levi's hand ran through his hair and then roamed to his cheek, delicately rubbing his fingertips against it. Eren couldn't move close enough and Levi sensed this, gripping him tightly in return. As they kissed Eren smiled, teeth and all against Levi's lips.

He felt elated when Levi smiled back.

Chapter End Notes

I have another story in the works! Please feel free to check out 'Mirrored Souls'. It's a Soulmate AU (Although it's Canon-Era) Riren/Ereri story. I also have that Last of Us AU in the works. Lots of love everybody!

This is not the end! See you when I post the epilogue, which will probably be in a few days.
And we have reached the end!

Ha, I told myself I was going to wait a week to post. Nope, I'm posting tonight!

Thank you to each reader who left kudos, commented and shared the journey of this story with me. It was an emotional ride from the very beginning and I wanted to create a bit of chaos because it felt more realistic to me. I didn't want some Pretty Woman story, I wanted it to be believable. (Although, I love that movie.)

I hope the ending is what you'd hoped it would be, I really poured myself into this story and especially the final chapters. After their initial falling out, I was struck with so much drive to deliver that I wrote the remaining chapters within a week. Seriously, I don't know what came over me but I was just excited.

Lots of love, guys. Here's the epilogue of Woven Strings.

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15 Months Later... June

He gave himself a final look over, pivoting his body to look at the back of his tuxedo. He sighed when he noticed his pant leg was stuck against his shoe and he moved down to adjust it. When he stood back up, he continued to observe himself in the full-length mirror. His chestnut hair had grown a bit longer as the months past, he held a strand of it between his fingers and debated on cutting it. Levi never said anything or complained, so he figured now wasn't the time to dwell on it. Today wasn't about him, after all. He smiled softly as he straightened his bow tie, unable to believe he could celebrate something like this.

After his mother's surgery and things had finally settled with Levi, Eren had gone to Long Lasting Memories and spoke with Nanaba. He didn't feel right about leaving without an explanation. She was more understanding than Eren felt he deserved but sympathized when he told her honestly what had happened. She wished him luck and Eren felt immense relief to leave the building and not look back. Eren wasn't going to waste the opportunity that Levi had given him so he moved forward. Instead, he focused on school and worked toward finishing and obtaining his degree. As far as work went, Eren had been fortunate to get a job at the very cafe he and Levi crossed paths at. He enjoyed how simple and fast-paced it was, plus he was able to sneak tea for Levi from time to time. Levi had rarely taken time to step away from his office but Eren would be ecstatic to see him stop by for lunch sometimes. It was temporary until he finalized what he wanted to do with his life. The options were endless and Eren wanted to take his time before deciding. He still wanted to continue with his art and perhaps teach, so that was still a plausible goal.

Levi had offered him a position at Smith Advertising, hearing the news that Erwin Smith would be
relocating which meant Levi would take his place as CEO. Hange would become the new executive chief and Levi mentioned casually that the position of Art Director would be available. Eren told him he'd think about, unsure if that was the setting he wanted to really be in and Levi didn't argue with him about it.

Eren continued living at home, despite the fact he and Levi had been together for over a year. When Carla was released from the hospital, Eren, Mikasa, and Hannes did what they could to accommodate her while she slowly recovered. For many weeks, Carla would go through stages of sickness and her doctor assured her it was her body getting used to the shrinkage of the tumor. So the three of them worked together while his mother slowly made her way to being healthy again. Her skin was filling out again and she was gaining the necessary weight she had lost. Her hair was losing it's thin texture and began to grow fuller; stronger. There were several doctors she continued to see to check on her progress but they never gave them any reason to worry. They assured them she was on the right path and they were amazed at how far she had come. Hannes was right, Carla was strong and Eren was proud of her.

Which is why that day was a special one.

He and Levi were currently staying at a lodge in Upstate New York, along with many of his own family and friends. Hannes had proposed to Carla not very long after her surgery and she was elated when she accepted. Eren was strange about it at first but after spending more time with Hannes, he realized he truly loved and cared about his mother. He had dealt with Eren getting his car impounded and thankfully he was able to get the car out and had it sold. Even Mikasa, for God's sake, told him to take a step back. She had learned to tone herself down as well and Eren knew he could too. Hannes had even asked him to be his best man and Eren was startled but accepted with a smile.

With the time between work and school, Eren learned to balance his family, friends and especially Levi. There were many nights during the week where he'd stay over and they'd lay in each other's arms. Eren enjoyed that intimacy the most. They had their moments when things would get heated between them, Eren screaming and Levi just staring impassively at him like he was throwing a temper tantrum. It irked Eren more when he didn't respond, he learned. As their relationship progressed, they learned more about each other and handled it in a way that suited them. Their relationship was public knowledge at this point and things seemed to settle after the video had been posted a year back. It was never brought up when he went to school or work and he was thankful. He started to feel... normal, ordinary even. He basked in it.

It was quiet in the large room, decorated with lush summer flowers and pines. Upstate New York was beautiful during the winter season but even during the summer, it held it's beauty to appeal. Eren gave himself a final look over, knowing everyone would be gathering by the lake soon. He turned and walked away from the mirror and stepped out into the hallway. He was smiling as he walked, his shoes padding softly against the carpet. Oblivious, he let out a startled noise when a hand shot out and pulled him into a small room.
The room was dim, curtains drawn as he was pushed against the wall, a mouth claiming his heatedly.

"Eager, much?" Eren asked once he regained his composure, staring with amusement into stormy eyes.

"You left before I could get my hands on you this morning," Levi said simply, his mouth trailing down to Eren's neck and sucking gently on that spot. Eren groaned, his head tilting back to give the other man access. His hands gripped the front of Levi's dark suit and Levi reached behind him to lock the door.

"With - ah! - good reason," Eren replied huskily, trying to stop any noise from leaving his lips as Levi move downward. "Best man, remember?"

Levi hummed, pushing Eren's suit jacket open and untucking the white button-up shirt beneath it. He placed open kisses on Eren's stomach and his skin twitched at the contact, already feeling heat pool to his groin. "How much time do we have, brat?" Levi asked.

"Uh," Eren's eyes were looking up to the ceiling, the sensations of Levi so close to his erection killing him. "5 minutes?"

"Good enough," Levi reached and pushed against the back of Eren's knee, moving his leg to drape over his shoulder while he kneeled in front of him. Eren finally released the moan that was building in his throat when Levi's hands moved to unbutton his slacks. They had arrived late last night due to Levi's schedule and they were exhausted from the ride, immediately going to sleep once they were in the comfort of their room at the lodge. It had been a few weeks since they initiated any contact with each other and Eren knew from his own frustration that Levi couldn't hold back.

Levi was moving too slowly to Eren's liking, nipping and kissing not just his stomach but his hip bones and he shimmied his pants down a bit. Eren groaned appreciatively when he felt Levi finally take his cock in his hand and those piercing orbs stared up at him, pinning him in place as his breathing became intense.

Eren couldn't stop the strangled sound that left him when Levi took him into his mouth, clawing helplessly at the wall behind him. He was too good at this, Eren thought unfairly as Levi didn't waste any time, sinking his mouth to the base and having Eren see white. His hands shifted and sunk into Levi's hair, the soft threads grounding him before he lost his mind. His entire body shuddered when Levi dragged his tongue, his eyes never leaving Eren's and that was always what triggered his release.
"Oh ahh!−" Eren moaned, trying to stop his hips from moving. His leg tightened on Levi's shoulder and he tore his gaze away. "Stop l-looking at me, you're gonna make me−"

Levi hummed and Eren felt it on his length, not able to stop the sounds of praise leaving his lips. He felt the familiar tightening inside his lower belly and Levi's hand snaked up and wrapped around the base of Eren's erection, pumping in time with his mouth. It sent Eren over the edge too quickly, releasing with a whine into Levi's mouth. Levi pulled back, a flush on his cheeks and he reached into his own pocket, taking a handkerchief and wiping his mouth with it. He kissed Eren's stomach again, letting his leg fall from his shoulder and moving to button his slacks again.

Eren was panting, his eyes closed as he tried to collect himself. His peace was interrupted when his phone began chiming away and it caused him to tense against the wall. Where Levi kneeled, he reached into Eren's pocket and held it out his phone to him. "Your sister," he said simply.

Eren fumbled with the device and brought it to his ear. "H-hello?"

"Where the hell are you, Eren? Carla is ready and everyone is waiting," Mikasa said, exasperation evident in her tone.

"Oh, uh, I'm−" Eren started, his voice higher in pitch.

"Are you-- are you panting right now?"

"What? No, I'm−"

"Eren, for God's sake, have some self-control!" Mikasa said loudly enough for both of them to hear and ended the call, leaving Eren to stare at his phone helplessly.

Levi chuckled, tucking Eren's shirt back into place while saying, "Yeah, Eren. Have some self-control."

Levi stood up fluidly, looking at Eren with a twinkle of mirth in his eyes. Eren glared, tucking his phone back into his pocket and straightening his tuxedo.
"If you didn't just give me such an incredible blowjob, I would be pissed at you right now," Eren muttered.

Levi shrugged and said, "I'll go out first so it isn't obvious."

"But what about..." Eren nodded his head down, noticing the tightness in the front of Levi's slacks.

Levi looked down and then back at Eren. "Oh, don't worry. We'll address that tonight," he stated flatly and reached up to kiss Eren gently.

The raven-haired man went ahead of him, going to the restroom to straighten himself up. Eren took in several deep breaths before pushing himself off the wall and making his way back into the hallway. He let the door close with a soft click and was about to make his way to the restroom as well when a voice stopped him.

"There you are!" Mikasa rushed over to him, trying her best to balance on the heels she was wearing. It was more than obvious she didn't wear them very often and Eren wanted to snicker. Her hair was tied up in an elegant bun and she wore a shimmering chocolate dress. "Come on, Carla's waiting!"

Eren was dragged away, inwardly mortified at the fact he didn't get a chance to clean himself up. When they arrived in the room Carla was getting ready in, she turned toward them and smiled. She looked beautiful, dressed in a laced white dress that flowed at her feet. The top of her dress slid on her shoulders, revealing the curve of them. She looked radiant. Her smile fell when she caught sight of Eren.

"Honey, you look a mess! Your hair is all over the place!" she said as hurried over and started fixing it with her own hands. Eren batted her hands away, narrowing his eyes.

"Stop! Okay, I know! I'll fix my own hair!" Eren retorted, grumbling under his breath. Levi strode into the room and Eren could have slapped him for how immaculate he looked. Not a hair out of place and his suit crisper than before. He walked in and watched Eren swat his mother's hands away.

"Levi! You look wonderful, we missed you this morning!" Carla complimented brightly, walking over and placing a hand on Levi's shoulder. Levi didn't shy away from the touch, he returned with a polite smile of his own. "Maybe you can teach my son a thing or two since he looks like he just
stepped out of a wind tunnel," she teased lightly.

"We get it!" Eren exclaimed and threw his hands in the air.

"I'll fix that, Carla." Levi stepped forward and in front of Eren, tugging him close and smirking up at him. Eren leveled a glare at him.

"We're going to go on ahead, we'll see you outside!" Carla called, taking Mikasa's arm as she went to leave the room. As she passed Eren, she smiled fondly at him and then exited the room.

Eren kept his eyes narrowed as Levi straightened out his tuxedo and ran a hand through his hair.

"That's quite a scowl you've got there," Levi commented, not taking his eyes off of his current task.

There was a vanity with a comb laying on it and Levi reached to pick it up, examining it for cleanliness before pressing it into Eren’s hair.

"I feel like you and my mother are plotting against me," Eren mumbled, tilting his head to give Levi room to move.

Levi sighed and chuckled out, "You and that fucking imagination of yours. Don't forget Mikasa."

Levi worked in silence and Eren couldn't help but watch his face as he concentrated.

"Your hairs gotten pretty long, thought about cutting it?"

"I probably should've before the wedding, but we've been busy. Why, don't like it?" Eren asked.

"I like your hair any way you have it, don't be a little shit. I was just asking. Now hold still."

"Sure you can reach from down there, old man?" Eren teased.
Levi tugged on a piece of his hair in warning and Eren yelped, trying to not laugh.

"There," Levi took a step back. "Much better, go look."

Eren looked in the mirror behind them and saw the reflection of the two of them standing next to each other. At least his hair was somewhat tamable, thanks to Levi. But something about seeing the two of them together made Eren's heart swell. Maybe it was just the atmosphere of the wedding making him feel so much.

Levi must have seen the soft look on Eren's face because he said, "Come here."

Eren didn't hesitate and Levi reached behind his neck and kissed him soundly. Eren could never get enough of him and was disappointed when Levi pulled away too quickly. "You'd better get your ass in gear, best man."

Eren grinned and the two of them stepped out of the room together.

Levi watched as Eren moved into place beside Hannes, bringing his hands and clasping them in front of him as their attention turned the entrance in which Carla would appear. The summer air was comfortable, not heavy and thick like Levi expected. He silently wondered why he hadn't ever thought to vacation here. The sunlight reflected against the lake behind the altar, offering a brightness to where the main wedding group was standing. It was a thought stored away for later, seeing how excited Eren was when they drove up. At first, Levi was going to decline and have Eren go on his own. He was sure his family would have their reserves about an ex-customer being with an ex-escort, but the topic was never discussed by anybody other than Eren himself or Mikasa. From what Levi understood, Eren's mother and Hannes were not aware of Eren's past and he planned to keep it that way.

Mikasa had tried hard to be accepting, anytime she'd bring anything negative up would result in Eren shooting her a deadly look. He gave the woman credit, he understood she was weary and he did what he could to make Eren happy. But she really did try and didn't bombard Eren nearly as much as she used to. They weren't perfect by any means, but Levi couldn't lie to himself and could admit he was falling more in love with Eren as each day passed. He learned about his quirks, like how he had to shake his leg when he sleeps or that he counts his sips when he drinks from a glass. He learned of his habits, like how he was accustomed to leaving a terrible mess behind whenever he worked on his projects in his garage. It was alien to him to have his life intertwined so deeply with another but he was learning each step of the way.

After two months of insistent pleading from his mother, Eren had told Levi is was time for him to finally meet her. That night they had dinner at Eren's house and he played the perfect boyfriend card.
Carla had taken quite a shine to him. Levi couldn't help but admit Carla was quite charming in her own way and he could see where Eren picked up many of his mannerisms from. And he couldn't refuse when Carla determinedly told him he'd have to come by for dinner at least once a month.

Levi had close friends, sure. But he didn't have any family so when he was around Eren's, it was unsettling and it took some getting used to. But he found there was always a warmth that lingered just as there always had been with Eren. He hadn't realized the actual impact Eren made in his life until it became a routine.

Levi glanced around as he took his seat, seeing several of Eren's friends that had made it up to attend. Armin and Annie sat next to each other while Reiner and Bertolt did the same. Jean was conversing quietly with Marco and Connie and Sasha sat behind him. Levi knew Eren's father had passed on but there didn't seem to be much family left on his side either. Aside from close friends of the family and a few of Hannes' family and co-workers, it was a small and quiet occasion. Levi was sure they all preferred it that way. Anything more would have been overwhelming, he was sure.

His train of thought shifted when Carla Yeager appeared, dressed in white and walking slowly toward the altar near the lake. She stood in front of Hannes and he offered her a sheepish but sincere grin while she smiled sweetly in return. Her dark hair had a single white lily placed where it was tied up and it added to the stunning contrast of her dress. The altar itself help several of the same flowers that would their way around the structure. The officiant began speaking shortly after, although Levi didn't follow every single word. His eyes watched Eren instead, how his bright gaze shined and he leaned in a bit to listen. He looked... so immensely happy.

Levi would sometimes bare the guilt of feeling this happiness, particularly when Petra came to mind. He did think of her from time to time and the guilt nestled it's way inside of him at the thought that she never had the chance to experience beautiful things like this. Especially love. He could picture her scoffing softly at him, shaking her head with a smile that said not to worry. He felt that Eren could sense it as well because as soon as his eyes looked up again, Eren was gazing at him with a soft smile. It reminded him that he was alive, here in the present, and his once gray world held color again. He always said that Eren deserved to be happy and Eren reminded him that he did as well.

Suddenly, Eren's eyes broke away from Levi's and he turned toward the officiant, who was holding his hand out to him. "The rings, please."

"Oh! Ah..." Eren patted his pockets and let out a huff of relief when he found the wedding band and Mikasa, standing beside Carla, handed a ring over as well. Levi couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes fondly. Carla and Hannes exchanged their rings and repeated after the officiant, staring at each other affectionately as they were announced husband and wife. They kissed briefly and those who were sitting stood up to applaud, including Levi.
They held hands as they walked down the path and away from the altar, smiling and waving as they did. Soon everyone was standing from their seats and following Hannes and Carla to where the reception party would be held. Levi waited for Eren, who beamed at him and slipped his hand into his.

The sun had set and the festivities carried on into the late evening. The terrace was brightly lit with wedding lanterns and surrounded by towering pine trees and luscious greens. There had been delicious food catered and the newlyweds had cut their respective pieces of cake, Carla catching Hannes by surprise when she smeared some against his nose. The was lightness in the air and everyone could feel it. For a majority of the night, Levi had been by Eren's side. He briefly spoke with some of his friends and even got to speak with Hannes. He hadn't really interacted with him very much since he seemed to work just as much as he did but it wasn't unbearable, especially since this was Eren's new step-father. It was actually an interesting conversation and Levi came to the conclusion that Hannes was a nice fit into Eren's family.

Eren bounced between conversations, casually sipping on his champagne while catching up with his family and friends. Levi broke away at some point and sat at one of the tables on the terrace, enjoying the moment of solitude.

Levi didn't dance, he just didn't. It wasn't that he didn't know how to, more so because he didn't see the point. He sipped on his cocktail and watched as Eren danced with his mother, both of them laughing as Eren twirled her. Hannes stepped in and Eren shrugged when Mikasa walked up to him, offering her some time as well. Levi couldn't help but chuckle when Eren started talking adamantly while it appeared Mikasa scolded him. Jean soon cut in and Levi groaned when Eren walked over to him, grabbing both of his hands and saying, "Dance with me."

"I don't dance, Eren."

"Oh, come on! If you're nervous, I can lead. You owe me for catching me off guard earlier," he said seriously. He glanced around and then leaned in the whisper in a sultry voice, "Dance with me and I'll do anything you want later. No objections."

He was going to be the fucking death of him.

"You're drunk, aren't you?" Levi asked, hiding the hint of a smirk in his tone.

"No, I'm tipsy. Huge difference. It's an open bar. Less discussing, more getting up."
Levi sighed indulgently. "Fine, but I'm leading," he said.

Levi followed Eren toward the center of the terrace and they stood in front of each other, Levi reaching to snake one arm around Eren's slim waist while the other took his hand into his own. Eren's dark brows rose in surprise when Levi began moving them in time with the mellow and soothing music that was playing, his feet moving expertly and his hold on Eren steady. Levi kept his gaze on those stunning bright eyes, feeling somewhat smug as he dipped Eren gracefully and caused him to gasp.

"I thought you said you don't dance," Eren said breathlessly as Levi brought him back to his feet.

Levi hummed, leaning and placing a small kiss near Eren's ear. "I said I don't dance, not that I can't. You're surprisingly good at this considering how clumsy you are."

"You won't be saying that once I step all over your feet," Eren chuckled and Levi extended him with a twirl and then brought him back close.

"You're such a brat," Levi responded as his hips moved in time with Eren's. There was something seductive about the way Eren's hips swayed, the light blush that adorned his cheeks and his hair falling just near his cheekbone. Eren's hands roamed over Levi's back, pressing tenderly and making the other man's breath hitch.

"I really am," Eren agreed lightly.

"You're making it really difficult to not drag you off into another room right now," Levi's voice was a bit rougher than he intended it to be but Eren didn't seem to mind. Instead, he leaned forward and kissed Levi solidly, not caring that several heads had turned to stare at them. Let them stare, Levi thought. Suddenly, dancing didn't seem so pointless. Perhaps it was the way Eren seemed to be an exception to just about everything that made him decide this.

"They're going to open their gifts soon," Eren said as he pulled back. The music had died down and Levi felt a small tendril of disappointment when Eren stepped away from him. "I need to get my gift ready and since you held up your end of the deal, I'll hold mine later," he whispered and kissed him one more time before adding, "I love you."

There was always a sweltering heat and tightening in his chest whenever Levi heard those words. It
never failed to make his heart race or his lips twitch. He never grew tired of hearing it. Whether it's in a fleeting pass or in the midst of making love, it was always expressed and said. Levi didn't know when Eren showed up to his doorstep, leaning against the frame and smiling deliciously, that this is where he'd end up. In the end, he didn't know what he did to deserve it but he certainly didn't fight against embracing it.

Carla and Hannes had opened several gifts together, whether it was gift cards, cash, household items or jewelry. They sat at a table that was placed at the front of the terrace, overviewing everyone in the room. Hannes wrapped an arm around Carla's shoulders and Carla smiled expectedly at Eren.

"So, none of you can laugh," Eren started, which caused several of his friends to laugh on purpose. "Ha, ha. Funny guys. Anyway, I started working on this a little later than I wanted to. Which I know sounds like me, but I really poured my heart into this. I hope you both like it."

Levi leaned his elbow on the table, watching Eren quietly. Eren had his gift covered with a white sheet and displayed on the same table the other gifts had been on. Levi himself was curious since Eren hadn't told him what he had been working on. Levi recalled the piece he had given him over a year back, which was displayed proudly in his living room. Every time he walked past it, he'd find himself stopping and staring with tenderness.

Eren removed the sheet, revealing a silvered wire piece. Many of the guests made short gasps of awe and Levi could see Carla bringing a hand to her mouth, smiling brightly beneath it. Levi pushed himself off of his elbow and stared in wonderment. Deep silver wiring wrapped around each other, twisting into two people with their arms wrapped around each other. It reminded Levi deeply of the work of art Eren had given him but it had striking differences. What was the most unmistakeable about it was the colorful red strings that were displayed in the gap between the figures.

"It took me a while to find a quote that suited this design. But I think I found it one that does it justice. 'Your understanding of a place changes the longer you stay; you discover more, and your own life gets woven into the strings of that love.'"

Levi knew he was affected just as profoundly as everyone else in the room, especially when some guests started clapping. Carla had rushed over to Eren, embracing him affectionately. Hannes clapped him on the shoulder, saying something Levi couldn't make out that caused Eren to laugh. Mikasa hugged him as well, smiling more brightly than Levi had ever seen her.

He wondered if it went unnoticed that Eren had looked at him while saying those words.

Levi slipped away and walked toward the lake, the moonlight reflecting brilliantly off the water's
surface. Carla and Hannes would be departing in the morning and on their way to their honeymoon. It was late, probably 11 PM and he knew many guests would be saying their goodbyes. He and Eren would be there for another full day, which would be nice since it would ensure the private time they craved. Eren's friends would be there as well, but with enough convincing Levi wondered if he could enjoy an entire day with Eren away from home. He congratulated Carla and Hannes and took a moment to gather his thoughts.

Levi briefly closed his eyes when he heard the sound of sand crunching behind him.

"How many times have we done this?" he heard Eren ask, his voice teasing.

Levi turned and said over his shoulder, "I'm not hiding, brat. Just needed a minute to catch my breath."

"I'm joking," Eren chuckled as he walked and stood beside Levi. After a few moments, Eren took a seat on the ground and sighed. "Sit with me?"

"On the fucking sand? No thanks."

"Live a little, it's not wet or anything. Come on," Eren beckoned, holding a hand out toward him.


He took a seat next to Eren, lips twisting in distaste at the feeling of sand against his trousers. But that annoyance melted away when Eren leaned his head on Levi's shoulder, sighing appreciatively while saying, "You know my mom closed on the house last week."

"Oh?"

Eren nodded, smiling tiredly. "Her and Hannes are buying a house about a half hour away."

"So where does that leave you?" Levi felt a hopeful tilt in his voice that he tried to hide.
"Well, I have a week to get my stuff out. Mikasa is going to move in with Jean, which is just gross. I'm sure I can find a bench in Central Park though."

Levi kicked his foot against Eren's, causing the brunette to laugh.

"You practically stay at my apartment through the week anyway, don't be a little shit. I can make room in my office for your art supplies."

Eren's laughter turned into soft chuckling. "I'll start moving my stuff in next week."

Levi nodded, satisfied with his answer. They sat in serenity while the water swished against the shore in front of them.

"It's been a long day," Eren murmured softly.

Levi hummed, placing a small kiss on Eren's head. "It has, but it wasn't bad."

"Thanks for coming with me, by the way. I know you didn't really want to."

"It's not that," Levi stated, his steely gaze looking out toward the water. "Your family... fuck, I can't believe I'm saying this. They can be intimidating sometimes."

"You didn't stray when Mikasa went after you with a baseball bat, so I'd like to think you're here to stay."

Levi laughed lightly at that, his shoulder shaking against Eren's face. "A solid point, but not what I was referring to."

Eren turned his head slightly and said, "Okay, so what are you referring to?"

Levi pondered silently, considering his words. "This made me think about the future, our future."
He could feel Eren's orbs on him.

"That quote," Levi murmured quietly. "It made me think... that this wouldn't be so bad one day."

A dark brow arched. "What wouldn't be so bad?"

Eren's voice was slightly slurred and tired, but Levi gestured with his hand and said, "You know... this."

That sobered Eren up quickly, the younger man raising his head and cerulean eyes widening in realization.

"Did you just... indirectly propose to me?"

Levi's heart slammed against his chest but he repressed his emotions. "Tch, don't be silly. Erwin will be leaving in October and you still have six months left of school. It wouldn't be practical."

"So...?" Eren pressed, making it hard for Levi to look at him.

"What I mean is that if this is something you'd want after we get situated and you graduate... I wouldn't be opposed to it."

Levi cleared his throat and felt his cheeks burn. Fucking shit. Why the hell am I saying this? It's the wedding, I know it is. It's making me sappy as all hell.

Even without looking, he still felt Eren's gaze piercing through him. All that was heard around them were the faint voices from the terrace and the wind tousling the water. Maybe he shouldn't have said anything, taking Eren's silence as a negative.

"Okay," Eren eventually said. "I'm just going to make one thing clear right now, I'm not wearing a dress."

Levi laughed unexpectedly at that. "Is that your way of indirectly accepting?"
"Maybe," Eren teased. When they faced each other again, Eren leaned and pressed his forehead against Levi's. "But if this is going where I think it is, then you'll just have to find out my answer when the time comes. Right now though, this is enough."

Levi's eyes fluttered closed and dammit, his heart was spasming inside of his chest. He finally reached and grasped the back of Eren's head gently, coaxing him to his lips. Eren let out a quiet sound of appreciation, moving and pressing Levi against the sand beneath. Levi wanted to say that the feeling of the dirt under him was uncomfortable but couldn't focus on it with Eren above him. From their spot on the shore, Levi wasn't sure if they could be seen. Neither of them seemed to care though.

"I love you, you know," Levi said softly as Eren pulled back. His gray eyes bored into stunning turquoise. "I know I don't say it enough, but I hope you know that."

Eren smiled, revealing even white teeth. "After everything we've gone through to get here, you think I don't know that? I don't need you to say it every chance you get because I feel it here," he emphasized with his hand touching the corner of Levi's chest, right beneath his heart. "We're better at this now."

"Sure as shit took us long enough," Levi responded. He reached up and carded his hand through Eren's chestnut hair, his gazer warmer than Eren had ever seen it.

They didn't know how much time had passed, savoring each other in the quiet tranquility of the lake. Both of them exhausted but neither making a move to leave. They simply brushed their lips against one another, holding onto each other with grazing touches. Eren was right and he felt that assurance when Eren reached for his hand, threading their fingers together like string. Levi knew he had never been surer of anything in his life. From the moment they had first been brought together to the very moment they shared intertwined along the shore...

Yes, Levi thought as he grasped Eren's hand tightly. This will always be enough.

"Your understanding of a place changes the longer you stay; you discover more, and your own life gets woven into the strings of that love."

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End Notes
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